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The Insider Outsider Vantage Point: Non-Fellow Educator Perspectives on TeachMichigan

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INTRODUCTION

To better understand TeachMichigan's early-stage implementation we asked non-fellow educators who work with current fellows to share their perspectives on the program. Non-fellow educators have a unique vantage point; they are insiders in that they work alongside fellows and understand the organizational context of their schools and districts but are outsiders in that they are not receiving any TeachMichigan programming. They are able to provide insight that complements the perspectives of current fellows. For example, non-fellow educators may observe changes in fellows' teaching practices, leadership behaviors, and contributions they have made to their school communities as a result of participating in TeachMichigan. As colleagues who work with TeachMichigan fellows, non-fellow educators offer valuable perspectives on whether the program has effectively identified and selected high-impact educators with the potential to improve their schools. They observe how fellows balance program requirements (e.g., time, workload) with other professional demands (e.g., teaching, coaching, professional development) and how these additional commitments affect their personal wellbeing. Non-fellows' proximity to current fellows allows them to provide a unique perspective on how the program affects peer relationships, collaborative practices, and effectiveness in leadership roles that may be difficult to ascertain from fellows directly.

Non-fellow educators in schools where TeachMichigan fellows currently serve are also important witnesses to the program's implementation at the organizational level. They possess knowledge regarding how TeachMichigan is viewed by those who work in the same schools as fellows but do not have access to the stipend, professional learning, and networks afforded to fellows. They can speak to broader positive or negative ways TeachMichigan is shaping their school culture and influencing relationships between educators in the building. They are also well positioned to provide new insight into TeachMichigan's potential to address educator workforce challenges in Michigan at both the local and state level. Their unique position in relation to TeachMichigan implementation makes non-fellow educators a valuable source of information whose perspectives stand to inform Teach For America on potential challenges they may face when growing or scaling the program.

Additionally, non-fellow educators stand to inform the TeachMichigan recruitment strategy moving forward. As potential future targets of TeachMichigan's flywheel recruitment strategy, non-fellow educators' impressions of the program's components, demands, and potential outcomes are important for informing recruitment efforts. Their perspectives shed light on educators' understanding of the program as well as areas of confusion or misunderstanding.

In this report, we analyze non-fellow educators' perceptions of TeachMichigan shared during focus groups conducted in their schools. In doing so, we answer the following questions:

- 1) What are non-fellow educators' impressions of the TeachMichigan fellowship program? What are common misconceptions, and what information gaps exist?
- 2) To what extent do non-fellow educators perceive TeachMichigan has identified and invited high-impact educators to join the program? What characteristics of fellows contribute to this perspective?
- 3) From the perspective of non-fellow educators, how if at all, has TeachMichigan shaped fellows' practice and the broader organization?
- 4) Do non-fellow educators think TeachMichigan has potential to address education workforce challenges in Michigan? What program features contribute to their perspectives?

METHODS

Data

To understand non-fellow educators' understanding and perceptions of TeachMichigan, we set out to conduct focus groups in all eight TeachMichigan traditional public school partner districts and one charter school partner district. We were unable to secure participation from educators in one district and not permitted to conduct focus groups with non-fellows in another district. Ultimately, we conducted

focus groups ranging from 2-4 educators across seven districts, which included the perspectives of 22 non-fellows who teach in schools where TeachMichigan fellows serve. In four focus groups, educators were purposively selected for participation based on their proximity to TeachMichigan fellows in either grade level or content area. Low response rates to requests for participation led us to adopt a convenience sampling approach in three schools where principals assisted in recruiting participants in one school and current TeachMichigan fellows recommended educators for participation in two. Focus group participants were each compensated for their time in the form of a \$100 Amazon gift card.

All focus groups were conducted in person at their schools, each lasting approximately one hour. To encourage open and honest responses before the focus group began, we communicated that we were not members of the Teach For America team and were not acting in any recruiting capacity.

Our focus group protocol was constructed to collect data about multiple aspects of non-fellow educator perceptions of TeachMichigan. In this analysis we draw on educator responses to questions on the following topics:

1. **Impressions of TeachMichigan:** We began by exploring non-fellows' prior knowledge of TeachMichigan by asking if they had heard of the program and what they knew about it. We then provided focus group participants with a TeachMichigan program brochure used during recruitment for the 2023-2024 cohort. Focus group participants were given approximately five minutes to review the brochure. After reviewing the brochure, we asked educators to share their impressions of the program. We specifically probed for thoughts on the structure of the fellowship, the different cohorts, the stipend, professional learning opportunities, and other program components that surfaced in educator responses.
2. **TeachMichigan's Influence on Fellows and Schools:** We explored non-fellow educators' knowledge of TeachMichigan fellows in their building and perspectives on the ways the program is shaping individual practices and the broader school organization. We began by asking participants if they knew anyone who was participating in the program. If they were aware of more than one fellow, we asked them to think of the person they knew best. Next, we asked how they would describe this fellow to others, and if they would consider the fellow to be a high-impact educator. We followed by eliciting perspectives on the influence of the program by asking educators if they had noticed any changes in fellows since beginning in the program.
3. **Potential of TeachMichigan to Address Educational Challenges:** We explored non-fellows' perspectives on the potential of TeachMichigan as a vehicle to address educational challenges in our state. We asked questions about the potential of TeachMichigan to support educational improvement at both the district and state level.

Data Analysis

To analyze the focus group transcripts, we began by developing an a priori coding scheme based on our research questions. Our initial codes captured the key areas of *prior knowledge of TeachMichigan, sources of knowledge about TeachMichigan, impressions of TeachMichigan, factors encouraging participation, factors discouraging participation, potential of TeachMichigan to address educational challenges in our state, overall perceptions of fellows as educators, high-impact educator status, and influence of TeachMichigan on fellows' practices and the broader school*. Prior to formal coding, two team members independently piloted this initial coding scheme on the same focus group transcript to assess its usability and identify potential refinements. This revealed the need for additional subcodes within our existing structure to better capture the themes surfaced in educator responses. For example, within the *positive impressions of TeachMichigan* initial code we added subcodes *state funded, state network, selectivity, and TFA affiliation* to our coding scheme. We then formally coded the transcripts using Dedoose. Table 1 contains a full list and description of initial codes we used in this analysis. Below, we present our findings.

Table 1. Initial Codes and Descriptions	
Code	Description
<i>Prior knowledge of TeachMichigan</i>	Educator awareness and understanding of TeachMichigan prior to reviewing recruitment materials
<i>Sources of knowledge about TeachMichigan</i>	Methods through which educators learned of TeachMichigan
<i>Impressions of TeachMichigan</i>	Educator perceptions of TeachMichigan and program components after reviewing recruitment materials
<i>Factors encouraging TeachMichigan participation</i>	Program factors noted to encourage participation in TeachMichigan
<i>Factors discouraging TeachMichigan participation</i>	Program factors noted to discourage participation in TeachMichigan
<i>Potential of TeachMichigan to address educational challenges in our state</i>	Perceived potential of TeachMichigan to address educational challenges in Michigan at both the school / district and state levels
<i>Overall perceptions of fellows as educators</i>	Perceptions of fellows not related to educator practices (e.g., behaviors, attitudes)
<i>High-impact educator status</i>	Perceptions of fellows as high-impact educators
<i>Influence of TeachMichigan on fellows' practices and the broader school</i>	Observed changes in fellows' teaching practices and contributions to the broader school community since beginning TeachMichigan

FINDINGS

Impressions of TeachMichigan

In this section we examine educators' background knowledge of TeachMichigan and overall impressions of the program, including perceptions of specific program components that may shape application and participation decisions. We analyze these through the lens of TeachMichigan's theory of change by examining how non-fellows perceive the program's core components of increased funding for educators, professional learning, educator empowerment, and interaction with high-impact educators. Additionally, we explore these perceptions in relation to TeachMichigan's goals of improving educator outcomes, generating more positive perceptions of education and educators, and improving student outcomes. In our analysis, we also surface information gaps that could inform future recruitment efforts.

Prior Knowledge of TeachMichigan

In all seven non-fellow focus groups educators were generally aware of TeachMichigan, however their depth of prior knowledge about the program varied considerably. Prior knowledge ranged from a robust to limited understanding of the program and its components.

Overall Program Knowledge

In a focus group where all participants were aware of TeachMichigan, one non-fellow noted the group's relatively robust understanding of the program and its components when asked if they had heard of TeachMichigan:

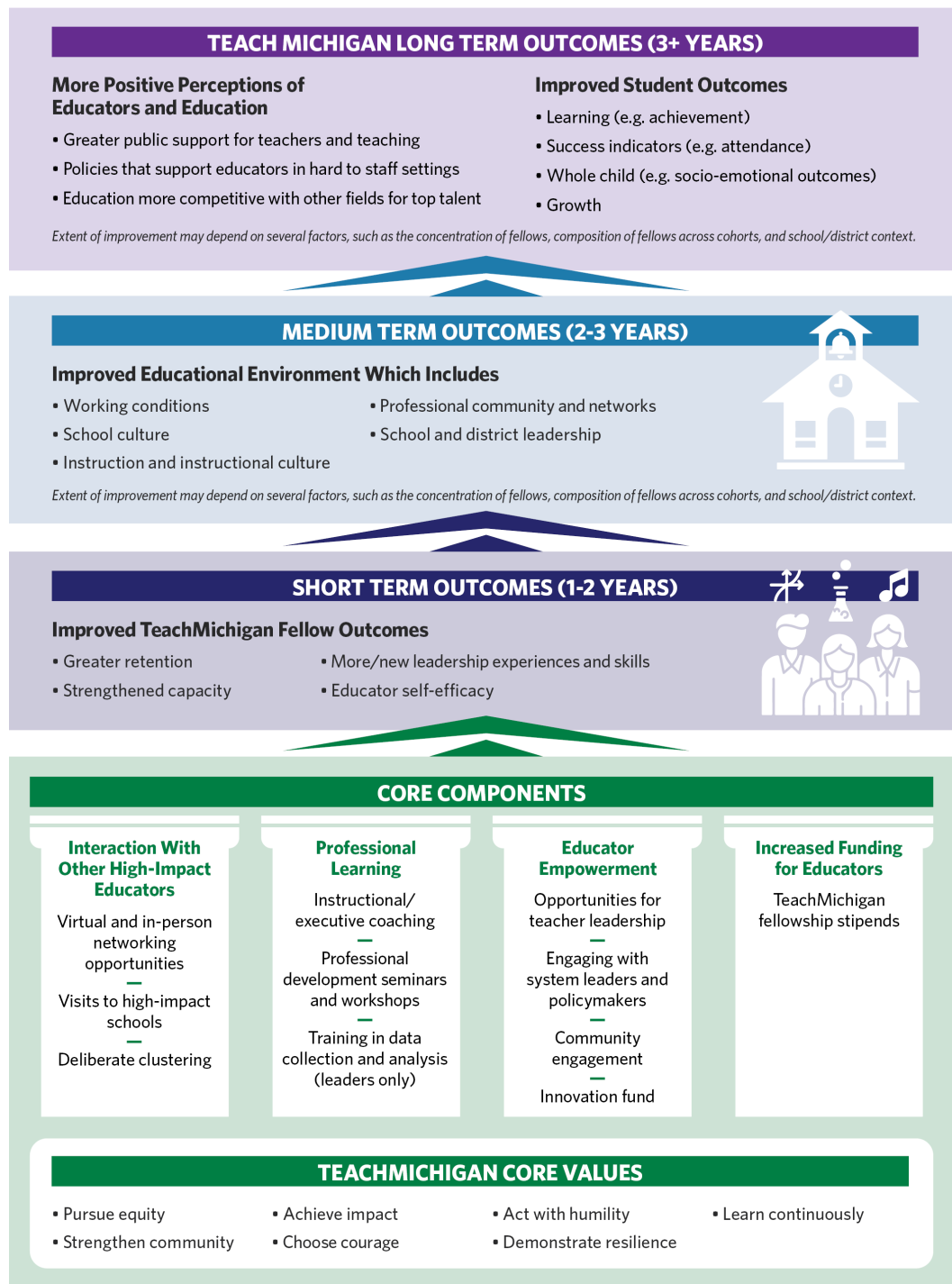
Yes, yes, we have heard of it. I know it's a three-year commitment. I know that it comes with a stipend of \$35,000 over the three-year commitment too, and it's available to schools that are noted to be Title one. I know that there are different tiers of it. There are different paths that you can take. There's an early educator path and then there's one where you would go and eventually get your National Board Certification. And then there's a leadership administrator one as well.

Financial Incentives

Non-fellow educators were generally aware of the financial incentives for participating in TeachMichigan, but were limited in their knowledge of specific details. One educator noted hearing "you get paid ten grand a year to do it," and "the third year is fifteen grand or something like that." While many educators knew of the program's financial incentives, they lacked specific knowledge of the stipend's amount or disbursement structure, as illustrated by statements such as, "I know that it's a paid fellowship," and "they have to do extra work, and they get a stipend for the extra work." One educator noted awareness of the financial support for obtaining National Board Certification,

stating “if you wanted to become National Board certified, they pay the fees that go along with it, which is nice.”

Figure 1. TeachMichigan 2024-25 Theory of Change



Cohort Structures

Prior knowledge about TeachMichigan's cohort structure also varied among non-fellow educators. Some understood the fellowship's basic cohort structure, making comments such as "there's different fellowships, like an aspiring leader one, there's one for new teachers and then there's a national board one." Others expressed a more limited understanding of the cohort structure, with one educator describing it as consisting of "two different levels. Beginning teachers have one that's less strenuous than older teachers." Other educators understood there was a basic division of cohorts, with one explaining they "know that there's different divisions. There's the teaching division and then there's the administration division, and then supposedly you're supposed to be grouped up [with] people in the area."

Professional Development

While non-fellow educators were aware the program offered professional development and networking opportunities, they demonstrated a limited understanding of specific details. One focus group participant noted knowing fellows "get together with teachers throughout the state," but didn't "know a lot about what they talk about." Another participant indicated that educators build supportive professional networks in the program, but they didn't "know in detail what it is that they do aside from they meet to grow each other as teachers." Some knew of the program's emphasis on supporting current educators as demonstrated by one who described TeachMichigan as "a program for coaching teachers to be better teachers."

General Structure and Commitments

Educators expressed a limited understanding of TeachMichigan's structure and commitments. One educator described the program's structure as "basically like a college class" with monthly Saturday meetings where fellows "basically [do] homework assignments." Educators also expressed limited prior knowledge of the program's travel requirements, with one noting knowing fellows "go on Saturdays to Detroit or somewhere to go to conferences."

Sources of Prior Knowledge

Focus group participants' primary source of prior knowledge about TeachMichigan was current fellows in their buildings. This suggests that TeachMichigan's flywheel recruitment strategy, where fellows attract other high-impact educators to the program, is successfully generating some preliminary program awareness through educators' professional networks. This "word of mouth" strategy may be emphasizing program elements that current fellows find most meaningful or impactful. As one educator noted, "the first time I heard about it was word of mouth, while another mentioned hearing about it from "my friend" who has "been doing it so I hear it from her." The flywheel recruitment strategy was evident in several focus groups, with one educator describing how they had been "invited to join the fellowship a couple of times" by current fellows in their building. Prior knowledge of TeachMichigan expressed by non-fellows may

provide insight into which aspects of the program are most salient to current fellows, as they chose to highlight these when discussing the program with colleagues.

District communications and staff meetings also served as sources of program awareness. One educator described how program information “came through recently [...] just another email from our superintendent,” but that they “clicked on it and actually read that through” only because they “saw TeachMichigan” and recognized “this is what [current fellow] was talking about.” Educators at some schools noted they had staff meetings where they talked about TeachMichigan, and specifically the stipend “extensively.” However, these meetings may have been limited in terms of raising awareness of or interest in the program, for as one non-fellow noted, they “went to the meeting just out of curiosity” and “there weren’t too many attending.”

Overall Impressions of TeachMichigan

We gathered non-fellows’ overall impressions of TeachMichigan following their review of the program brochure, including perceptions of program components that may influence application and participation decisions. We organize this analysis into three subsections: positive impressions of TeachMichigan, negative impressions of TeachMichigan, and information gaps regarding TeachMichigan.

Positive Impressions of TeachMichigan

Educators expressed several positive impressions of TeachMichigan that align with the program’s core components and goals outlined in the theory of change. These impressions spanned program components including financial incentives, professional development opportunities, cohort structures, manageability of time commitments, state funding, statewide networks, and Teach For America affiliation.

Financial Incentives

Non-fellows expressed positive impressions of TeachMichigan’s stipend and its structured disbursement strategy. Educators perceived the stipend amount to be “very large” and the size of stipend signaling TeachMichigan “is an opportunity they really want people to take advantage of.” Educator perceptions of the stipend align with TeachMichigan’s goal of elevating perceptions of the teaching profession with one educator noting that “teaching has historically been a lower paid profession” and “this is a hard job, a hard career, and someone needs to pay us for it.” Another goal of TeachMichigan is elevating the perceptions of educators. Educators made strong connections with the stipend to this goal, viewing it as a signal of the value of both their time and professional expertise. One educator explained:

My time is worth something, my expertise is worth something [...] I am not just in it for the money [...] and I think that's important for me as an educator and somebody who, when I say yes to something, I'm potentially saying no to my son in a way.

These impressions suggest that educators view the stipend as not only financial compensation, but as an acknowledgement of teaching's professional status and the value of their expertise and personal efforts in line with TeachMichigan's goals.

The yearly disbursement strategy, in comparison to a lump sum payment one non-fellow noted, reflected the program's commitment to "supporting [fellows] all the way through." Another educator connected the disbursement strategy to retention, by describing how giving "a little bit each [year]...keeps you going" and "gives you some incentive to keep working at it and stay in this program and also stay in teaching." This suggests that educators perceive the stipend's disbursement structure as an effective strategy for achieving TeachMichigan's goal of improving teacher retention.

Non-fellow educators perceived the stipend as enabling "lifelong learning" opportunities, specifically noting how it could support professional development suggesting that "teachers [could] put the money back into their own education." Multiple educators cited the stipend's potential to enable a return to college to pursue an advanced degree. The positive impression of the financial support for pursuing National Board Certification through TeachMichigan was described by one educator who stated:

In this profession, a lot of times things are expected, and they're not always compensated. It's just expected. So, it's nice that they are willing to compensate for the expectation of spending time and for the National Board when I know they pay for all the things to get your National Board.

These impressions suggest that TeachMichigan's stipend may provide access to professional development opportunities that may otherwise have been financially out of reach for educators and contribute to the program's goal of improving educator outcomes.

Non-fellow educators cited the stipend as an "attractive" component of the program, with one noting it was "the thing that got me to look into [TeachMichigan] initially." However, the stipend may not be the sole driver of educators' participation decisions. One educator who was planning on applying to the program explained their decision was influenced only "partially for the money," coupled with "hoping that maybe [TeachMichigan will] kind of renew that sense of what I came into this whole field for in the first place. Passion for kids and teaching. I still have it." This perception suggests that while TeachMichigan's stipend is an important factor in educator participation decisions, it is not the sole factor considered. Taken collectively, educator perceptions reflect the financial incentive is seen as an influential piece of a comprehensive package that stands to improve educator outcomes and elevate the teaching profession, in line with TeachMichigan's goals.

Professional Development

Educators expressed positive impressions of TeachMichigan’s professional development opportunities, seeing the program as an opportunity to improve their teaching practice. As one focus group participant noted:

It sounds like the whole goal behind it is just to create stronger educators [...] that can feel like there's continued education so that you can keep up with what's changing in the world and what's changing in education to be on the top of things.

One non-fellow expressed the targeted development offered by the program opened “a door of opportunity” for teachers who lacked access to resources outside their schools by providing access to development opportunities they required or illuminating areas for growth they had not yet recognized. Focus group participants noted the program’s emphasis on building skills while actively teaching resonated with them, as one educator described, “sometimes schools don’t necessarily have the best PD.” This reflects the overall perception that TeachMichigan’s professional development is more aligned with the specific needs of experienced educators and higher quality in comparison to that which they are offered within their schools and districts.

Non-fellow educators saw the potential of the program’s professional development to “bridge the gap” between teacher preparation programs and classroom experience, with one educator explaining, “we’ve all taken college classes that don’t accurately teach you classroom management for real or don’t teach you the latest pedagogical techniques.” Additionally, educators noted the potential for the program’s professional development to be particularly impactful for early career teachers. The cohort-based learning approach with skilled similar content area colleagues appealed to educators who valued learning from their peers.

Cohort Structures

Positive impressions of TeachMichigan’s cohort structures centered around their differentiation and focus on bringing together educators at similar career levels with shared interests and goals. Non-fellow educators valued how the program allows participants to “pick the cohort that’s suitable for you and your expertise” in contrast to traditional mandatory professional development that “doesn’t necessarily meet their needs.” Focus group participants noted the opportunity for “learning and growing” alongside other educators at similar career levels who are equally driven to improve their practice as an attractive component of the program. Content-specific network connections within cohorts resonated for specialized educators who did not have similar role colleagues within their schools, as one educator noted, “I could learn more things if I would be in a group with gym teachers, that would be helpful. I don’t get as much when I am in a group with [others].” This illustrates the positive perception of providing cohort-based connections with educators in similar grade levels or content areas.

Time Commitments

Focus group participants expressed positive impressions of TeachMichigan's commitments, often perceiving them more manageable than previously thought when hearing "the way other people talk" about them. While educators had heard from others that the program was "so much work," "so time consuming," and especially challenging for those with families, reviewing the recruitment materials shifted their perspectives. One educator who "thought [from] the way other talk that it was more work and time consuming than what it is." The time commitment relative to the level of compensation made the program seem "doable" one educator noted. Additionally, the "grow you where you are approach" noted by one non-fellow was appreciated as it allowed fellows to remain in their current schools "where they wanted to be" rather than be at risk of being transferred within the district. This suggests that educators perceive the commitment to remain in their current schools throughout the program as both a personal and district commitment and is a valued component for some educators.

State Funding

Non-fellow educators responded positively when they learned TeachMichigan is a state funded program, seeing it as a signal of the state making a meaningful investment in the profession. As one educator noted, "I didn't realize that it was state funded [...] that makes me feel better, because when I look at politics and things like that, a lot of the big issues are not education, and I feel like it should be." This educator perceived the investment as a promising retention strategy in response to the state's current teacher shortage compared to "loosening up the requirements," and expressed appreciation of an approach that focused on supporting and retaining "people who did get a degree and are certified and want to be here." This suggests that educators view state funding for TeachMichigan as recognition of the need to invest in the current educator workforce of qualified teachers.

Statewide Network

TeachMichigan's emphasis on building professional connections across schools and districts statewide was viewed positively by educators. One focus group participant noted how TeachMichigan addresses professional isolation and how the professional networks the program provided could allow the program to act as an "agent of change." This educator explained their perspective by describing the transformational power of "having a group of people consistently meeting and making goals" and learning from educators across districts, seeing it as "connecting with other schools to see if the same things are happening." Educators noted these types of networking opportunities were limited within their schools and districts, and the statewide network connections provided by TeachMichigan could provide opportunities to discuss "what are you doing with this curriculum that maybe would benefit me, [...] how to spice things up, make it feel more comfortable, engage more." This suggests that educators perceive statewide networking opportunities could enhance teaching practices in partner districts, in line with TeachMichigan's goals.

TFA Affiliation

After reviewing recruitment materials, several non-fellow educators noted recognizing the program's affiliation with TFA. One educator appreciated TFA's shift in focus from their traditional mission of bringing new educators into the profession to "finally trying to retain great teachers" by providing them with support, resources, and professional connections with other current educators. As this educator explained, this approach had "been needed for a long time [...] for many different reasons to help keep really good teachers."

During one focus group, educators expressed appreciation of the program supporting current teachers, its potential to attract new talent into the profession, and to keep new educators there "long term." This stemmed from the program's efforts to elevate the perceptions of educators, a long-term goal of TeachMichigan. As one educator explained, "we deserve to be put on a pedestal [...] to be pampered" similar to other professionals like "doctors, lawyers, whatever." The program's focus on providing educators financial, emotional, and developmental support were noted as influential components leading to this perspective. These perceptions suggest educators view the support provided by TeachMichigan as having the potential to improve retention and the perception of education as comparable to other professions for top talent, in line with the program's goals.

Negative Impressions of TeachMichigan

Focus group participants raised some negative impressions of TeachMichigan related to the program's core components and goals outlined in the theory of change. They surfaced concerns regarding program components including financial incentives, professional development opportunities, cohort structures, time commitments, state funding, TFA affiliation, and selectivity.

Temporary Financial Incentives

Negative perceptions of TeachMichigan's financial incentives centered on the stipend's limited duration, and its potential ineffectiveness in addressing long term teacher retention. One educator noted the stipend is "going to appeal to someone who wants to teach anyway" and the three-year limitation might not effectively retain teachers considering leaving the profession as it "has an end date [...] and it doesn't change their condition." They perceived the stipend as having the possibility of "keeping [them] in the game [...] maybe a few more years, and a few could be two, one, it could be until I get done with this and I cash out and walk away." This concern was echoed by another educator who noted that while the stipend was an "enticing" way to cover family mental health costs, the limited duration of the stipend made them reconsider participating in the program. These perceptions suggest that the limited duration of the stipend may dissuade educators from participating and get in the way of realizing TeachMichigan's long-term retention goals.

Other negative perceptions of the program's financial incentives centered around the perceived lack of financial benefits for receiving National Board Certification. While recognizing the personal value of certification, they questioned its "return on investment" given the time requirements in comparison to receiving an advanced degree. As one educator explained, "on top of teaching the amount of hours that we teach every week, putting in all of the time in the classroom, out of the classroom away from our families, makes it hard to think about doing something like this." However, they noted that a district-level financial incentive for National Board Certification might alter this perspective. This suggests that improved communication of the State of Michigan's current financial incentive for National Board Certification in recruitment materials could positively shape educators' perceptions of TeachMichigan's long-term financial benefits and application and participation decisions.

Quality and Applicability of Professional Development

Non-fellow educators questioned the potential of TeachMichigan's professional development to be immediately employable, impactful to their practice, or have the potential to "move the needle" with students. Educators expressed concern that the content of the professional development received at convenings would not be usable within their specific district contexts. One educator explained, "we would go off and be inspired, we would go off and have community and we would come back [...] and not be able to use any of it."

Many of the less favorable impressions of TeachMichigan's professional development stemmed from conversations with current fellows. Focus group participants expressed concern that the content of professional development would not benefit their practice as it would focus on skills educators have already acquired. They explained, citing a conversation where a fellow relayed that the professional development was rudimentary stating "these first couple cohort meetings, it's like I could have run that." Others questioned the innovativeness of the professional development, as one who worked with current fellows noted "when I look at the level of reflection they're being asked to do, I don't feel like it's any different" than other professional development, and "if the only thing I was going to get out of it was reflection, I feel like I would reflect myself to destruction." Educators also had concerns about the heavy reliance on online professional learning opportunities, after hearing from current fellows "a lot of it gets done on Zoom." Others questioned the quality of the professional development after hearing "that some of the [fellows] in that program currently are not getting feedback as timely as they anticipated based on what they were told." These concerns suggest that TeachMichigan's professional development opportunities are not always meeting some fellows' expectations, and fellows' concerns are shaping non-fellow educators' perceptions of the program.

Cohort Structure Does Not Allow Room for Everyone

A common theme across interviews was the perception that the current cohort structure is missing a "fourth category" as one educator described, for "experienced

teachers that's not National Board that still want to grow." Experienced educators expressed a desire to participate in TeachMichigan to become "better educators" and "more reflective teachers" but saw no place for them within the current cohort structure. One focus group participant explained, "I'm not necessarily an early educator. I don't have an Aspiring Leadership piece in me, so that puts me in this National Board Certified group. And that's not really checking the boxes for me."

Experienced educators expressed interest in a cohort that is "geared toward seasoned teachers who want to continue to crush it in the classroom" without having leadership aspirations or a desire to become National Board Certified. These educators desired a cohort that allows them to "stay in their position and continue to grow as a teacher" and avoid becoming "stagnant" through developing teaching practices that could drive improvement in student outcomes. One educator elaborated on the desire for an experienced educator cohort to be a "track for just instructional moves [...] explicit instruction instead of having to be stuck into leadership or National Board [...] getting feedback on things we know are super impactful." Experienced educators perceive those without administrative aspirations choosing to participate in TeachMichigan within the current cohort structure as "feel[ing] this is encouraging them to do other things" out of alignment with their career goals.

Time Commitments

Non-fellow educators expressed some concerns about the commitments required for participation in TeachMichigan and their potential to conflict with current professional development goals and commitments. Educators questioned whether program commitments would conflict with their plans for pursuing an advanced degree or take time away from district mandated professional development. They also questioned managing TeachMichigan's workload while maintaining professional commitments to students, especially for early career teachers. One focus group described this concern, "if these first-year teachers are already stressed out and then you are basically adding more college level work to 'em, [...] how is that going to impact their stress and their overall work ethic towards the students too?" Professional commitments, such as coaching and teaching, were perceived as barriers to effectively managing program commitments.

State Funding Concerns

While focus group participants generally saw state funding for TeachMichigan as a positive signal of investment into the teaching profession, one non-fellow educator expressed concern that TeachMichigan received state funding, perceiving the investment to be an ineffective use of tax dollars. This educator explicitly questioned the use of public funds for providing financial incentives for participation in the program, stating "I don't know if I would like my tax dollars to go to something like this. It's a big expense. I pay an awful lot in taxes [...] I don't personally think this is the most effective use of \$35,000." This may suggest that some educators have concerns with the use of state funds to provide financial incentives for individual educators.

Teach for America Affiliation

Negative impressions of TeachMichigan's affiliation with Teach for America stemmed from focus group participants' past experiences with the organization in their schools. Educators in one focus group expressed concerns around the quality of Teach for America teachers. These experiences with TFA corps members led these educators to be skeptical of Teach For America affiliated programs. One educator explained the affiliation with Teach For America raised a "red flag right off the get go." These impressions suggest TeachMichigan's affiliation with Teach For America may present participation barriers for educators that have had less favorable experiences with TFA corps members in the past.

Selectivity

Focus group participants questioned limiting what one educator referred to as "best in class" professional development to only a select group. As one educator noted, "if anybody wants to be in it, I feel like everybody should be able to be in it. If you want to better yourself, like State of Michigan, let's go, let's do it." They further described the benefits of expanding access, noting educators could be "much stronger as a team, as a group, as a profession [...] we're here to support each other." These perceptions suggest some educators perceive TeachMichigan's selectivity as negatively impacting the program's goals of increasing educator capacity and building professional network connections by creating divisions amongst educators rather than collectively developing Michigan's educator workforce.

Some focus group participants raised questions around why some teachers were selected over others, with one noting they saw "some really good teachers that didn't get accepted." Another educator raised additional questions regarding whether TeachMichigan's selection process was effective in identifying high-impact educators for the program when some fellows are so novice. This educator explained how a colleague in their building who was selected to be a fellow "had never really been a teacher which put a really bad taste in my mouth for these kinds of programs." They further noted that selections decisions such as these seem "like another feather in the cap of those who are already on the fast track to wherever it is they want to go professionally." This suggests that educators in some contexts may perceive TeachMichigan's selection process as misidentifying the right educators to be fellows.

Information Gaps

Educators expressed information gaps relating to the program and its components after reviewing the program brochure that may shape application and participation decisions. Additionally, educators expressed that the recruitment materials were unclear on some aspects of the program, and in some instances expressed a desire for additional information relating to program components including financial incentives, professional development, cohort structures, time commitments, and National Board Certification. We discuss the identified information gaps that may be

addressed in future recruitment efforts to improve educators' knowledge of the program and potentially influence decisions to apply and ultimately participate.

Financial Incentives

Understanding the tax implications of the stipend was a common concern. Non-fellow educators raised concerns on how much of the stipend would translate into actual income for fellows. They wanted to know "how much am I being paid for real?" as "the way it's presented it's a tax issue." Educators questioned if the State of Michigan or TeachMichigan were assisting with taxes on the stipend. Other stipend related questions centered on the disbursement strategy of the yearly stipend, and the tax implications of lump sum versus structured payments. As one educator explained, "If it's a lump sum then the tax is going to be ridiculous. If it's a stipend throughout the year, then my tax is going to be much lower. If you give me a \$5,000 check and government going to take \$2,500 of it and I'm [getting] \$2,500." Providing clear information on stipend disbursement so prospective fellows could investigate the tax implications for themselves could help assuage these concerns.

The financial implications of not completing the program were a commonly identified information gap. As one educator noted of the program brochure, "it doesn't show you any of the penalties." One educator noted their "biggest concern" was wanting to know "how locked in" they were, and what the financial penalties would be if they were unable to sustain their commitment through the full three years. Addressing this gap by providing guidance on the implications of early exit within the program literature could shape application and participation decisions, as one educator explained, "if I had all of that outlined, then I would give it a shot if I knew exactly what I was getting into."

Professional Development

Focus group participants identified several gaps in information around the professional development opportunities offered by TeachMichigan that could potentially shape their decisions to apply and participate. Educators wanted information on the facilitators and the content of the professional development the program offers. One educator questioned whether professional development sessions would involve them "just showing up, talking about my experience as a teacher" or would provide "more skills that I can put in my toolbox that I don't know." Experienced educators questioned the relevance of TeachMichigan professional development to their practice, as one questioned, "what am I going to get out of this or what is somebody going to teach me that I haven't seen or done already?" Providing details on the curricula offered by TeachMichigan professional development opportunities may influence experienced educators' decisions to apply and participate.

Questions were also raised about the specific content and support structures provided to fellows pursuing National Board Certification, with one educator noting their description within program materials to be "vague." Another expressed wanting to know:

You're going to have a lot of support and what kind of support that would be. Board certification comes in four different parts. So, the support doesn't always necessarily [need to] be the same. It needs to be more specialized as per component.

Non-fellow educators also questioned the existence of ongoing support for maintaining certification past the fellowship's three-year commitment, wondering if this is "something that TeachMichigan supports, or are you just on your own for keeping up that [certification]." Educators also wanted to know what research was used in the design of the National Board cohort's professional development programming that would prepare them for certification, and what the completion rates of current fellows were. These information gaps suggest that providing cohort specific professional development curricula, details of support structures, and the certification rates for fellows in program brochure could shape educators' application and participation decisions relating to the National Board Certification cohort.

Cohort Structures

Information gaps on TeachMichigan's cohort structures centered around the requirement for having a formal leadership role for participation in the Aspiring Leaders cohort. Citing the requirement for an "opportunity to serve in some leadership capacity" noted in the program brochure, educators questioned if they would have to be "entrepreneurial and create a new position for themselves" or if their district would direct their school to "find a way" for them to participate in a leadership capacity. One educator explained, "because I was more going for the special ed director or special ed supervisor [...] but there really isn't, in this school, leadership towards that, so how would they foster that or give you the opportunity." Educators further questioned what types of leadership role the cohort was applicable to, noting that "when we think leadership, we just think principal administration and I think it can be other things" such as "leading your own PLC." Questions also arose about the cohort's pathway to formal administration as illustrated by one educator who asked, "is that kind of geared for active teachers that are looking toward getting an endorsement and administration?" Other educators questioned the cohort's ability to support their professional goals, with one noting, "I don't think that being a principal is where I would want to go with leadership and maybe I just want to hear what the other jobs that people are experiencing and what their roles are and what they're doing." Addressing these information gaps in the program brochure by clearly defining qualifying leadership roles, outlining how partner districts may support fellows' access to leadership opportunities, and how the cohort can support career pathways outside of formal administrative positions could shape educators' application and participation decisions relating to the Aspiring Leaders cohort.

Time Commitments

Non-fellow educators identified considerable information gaps around time commitments of the program that had the potential to affect their participation

decisions. While the program brochure specified a 5 to 10-hour monthly commitment, educators questioned the accuracy of this stated requirement, with one suggesting, “this could be anywhere from 15 to 30 hours depending upon how rigorous the assignments really are.” Educators expressed wanting specific details regarding what the assignments consisted of, with one questioning, “what is it that I’m actually going to be [doing]? Am I writing papers? Am I doing a study? Am I collecting student work?” Educators wanted to know if these commitments were to be fulfilled “in person” and required them to travel. Others expressed wanting “even more definition [...] literally to the point of when is it meeting, what are the time commitments, when are they going to happen?” One educator suggested it “would be helpful if they had some sort of syllabus to go with so that way you can really see what you’re getting to see what is actually expected of you within the program and expected of you within the classes.” Educators also wanted to know about the flexibility of the time commitments, as one educator balancing family obligations explained, “let’s say my son has a basketball game on the Friday night [...] what is my penalty for [...] missing two hours or whatever.” This suggests that addressing these information gaps by providing a detailed program syllabus outlining assignments, work expectations, and flexibility policies in program brochure could influence educators’ application and participation decisions.

A common misconception expressed by non-fellows related to the total years of commitment required by the program. Many noted they perceived the commitment to be only two years, referencing the length of fellowship provided within cohort descriptions in the program brochure. Educators were confused about what third year commitments were after cohort programming was completed. The third-year commitment is only mentioned in the stipend disbursement schedule in the program brochure. A more prominent placement and detailed explanation of third year commitments could better inform participation decisions.

National Board Certification

Non-fellow educators demonstrated an information gap around National Board Certification and its value for supporting their professional goals. Educators expressed a limited understanding of National Board Certification and its requirements, stating “what does that [National Board Certification] actually mean, I don’t know” and “you have to take a test or something.” Confusion was expressed by educators as to whether National Board Certification was a supplement to or replacement for teacher certification, and if it allowed national mobility for educators by acting in lieu of state licensure. Educators questioned the value of certification to their professional goals, with one educator wondering, “is that just a title I’m going to walk around saying I’m board certified and nobody else in education knows?” These information gaps suggest providing background information on National Board Certification, including certification requirements, and outlining the benefits of certification to professional goals could positively shape educators’ application and participation decisions relating to the National Board Certification cohort. This may be particularly important given the Michigan context, which until recently did not have any state initiatives around

National Board Certification and has very few National Board Certified educators relative to other states.

Fellows as High-Impact Educators

Given TeachMichigan's goal of retaining *high-impact* educators, we were interested to learn non-fellows' perspectives on the fellows they serve alongside. Specifically, we sought to investigate the extent to which non-fellow educators perceive TeachMichigan has identified and invited high-impact educators to join the program. We also set out to understand the characteristics of these educators that contribute to non-fellows' perspectives.

We asked participants who indicated they know fellows in their schools to think about how they would describe the fellow they know the best to a friend who was going to start teaching at their school. Participants were generally very positive about their fellow colleagues, using descriptors such as "helpful," "resourceful," "fair," "dedicated," "compassionate," and "problem solver." Participants in only one focus group voiced concerns about one TeachMichigan fellow colleague. As we talked with participants, there were three themes that emerged in terms of strengths of their fellow colleagues including being a lifelong learner, serving as a resource to other educators, and always striving to improve as an educator.

Skilled Educators

Focus group participants often described the respect they had for their fellow colleagues as educators. They viewed fellows as high-impact educators because of the excellent work they were doing day-to-day with their students. At times, participants noted how strong fellows are as instructors. For example, one participant spoke from the vantage point of both parent and teacher colleague noting his engaging teaching methods:

He's known as the fun teacher. All the kids love being in his room. My son hated leaving his room and going on to the next teacher because he's very hands-on. Student engagement is just huge. In his room. He blows stuff up. They're always making something or experimenting. So that's neat.

In another district, a participant noted how impressed they were with how well their Early Career cohort fellow colleague supports students' social-emotional development:

I see her impact in some of my students and it's more socially than academically. Specifically, there's [a student] in my class that I know spends a lot of time with her, and earlier in the year we were playing at recess, we were playing duck, duck, goose, and it was her turn, and she stopped and she goes, "Who hasn't had a turn yet?" This little girl in my class had the kids raise their hand and as soon as she did it, I was like, "Oh, that comes from spending time with this teacher." She's taught that skill of looking back and being considerate and leadership, being

considerate of others. And she's modeled that enough for her students. She's really good at that. You can see them portraying that.

In several focus groups, participants highlighted how strong fellows are in terms of building meaningful relationships with students and families. One participant noted the exceptional rapport multiple fellows in her building have with students:

All the kids give them a hug when they walk in. Happy, all excited about what they're doing. They come in here and say, 'Hey, we just learned that over there. We're going to do something here that relates to over there.' And they're excited about it and run and tell them. [They have] good relationships with the students. And then the students feel comfortable enough to go and ask questions, even if they really truly don't get it.

Focus group participants note that the rapport fellows build with students often extends to parents. Another focus group participant felt that the way TeachMichigan fellows understand and interact with families was a key point of distinction from other educators in the building:

The people that I know in [TeachMichigan] are high-impact throughout. I'm constantly impressed with their level of understanding of our families, what they face, what they need. I feel like that's a spot where they shine. They always do a really great job of making sure if we're going to have a meeting about a concern or an academic concern or anything, that the parent is very comfortable. They've reached out several times before the meetings happen to make sure the parent knows what's coming.

Aligned with Teach For America's approach to defining and selecting fellows who are high-impact not only based on raising student achievement but across different domains, focus group participants note their fellow colleagues as skilled educators in diverse ways.

A Welcome Resource to Other Educators

A common theme that emerged from focus groups was that participants see their TeachMichigan fellow colleagues as a resource to other educators in their schools and districts. Non-fellows noted that fellows they know serve as both formal and informal mentors, are knowledgeable and eager to share their knowledge with other educators, and want to see their colleagues be successful.

Serves in a mentoring capacity

A common theme that emerged from focus groups was that non-fellows often view their fellow colleagues as mentors. At times, this is linked to the fellow's formal mentoring or coaching role. For example, one non-fellow noted, "She's super, super helpful as far as coaching and being a teacher mentor." Another non-fellow who is new to the district explained:

She has helped me get things I need to understand, and when I'm frustrated trying to figure out how to do something because the school has a whole lot of technology, a whole lot of things that I wasn't accustomed to and actually have to use. And she was like, "You know what? You're going to get it. Don't expect to get it on time and all this, just calm down." She was patient with me to teach me how to use things and how to create lesson plans.

This non-fellow expressed how grateful he was for the support provided by his fellow colleague as his mentor and coach, particularly noting her assistance navigating new technology as well as reassuring him along the way. Another non-fellow explained he found interactions with his fellow colleague even more valuable than those with his formal mentor. He attributed this to the fact that she is a very supportive person but also that she is in a coaching role and therefore focuses on supporting teachers:

She is very, very supportive and she will be the go-to person more so than my mentor at that time. Sometimes it's hard to get in contact with other people who have other obligations, but her job is specific to that. So she is definitely more available than even the person next door. She doesn't have a class to worry about either. She can focus on growing her colleagues.

At times, other non-fellows noted that they view fellows they know as mentors despite the fact that they are not serving in any official mentoring capacity. As explained by one non-fellow:

I see this person as a mentor, I see this person as someone who has lots of years under their belt and has kind of been through a lot of things, anything under the sun. I feel like I can go and be like, "Hey, can you help me? Can [we] process this? What would you do in this situation?" [That] kind of thing.

Here, the non-fellow elevates the fellow's teaching experience and their approachability, signaling the value of the fellow to the broader school community.

In the know and willing to share

During focus groups, non-fellows noted they find fellow colleagues they know to be very knowledgeable *and* willing to share what they know with others—these are the “go-to” people in their schools. One non-fellow explained they view their fellow colleague as “Available, knowledgeable, knows the ins and outs.” Non-fellows noted that they appreciated the fact that they felt they could trust the information gleaned from fellows. A non-fellow explained fellows are “people you can go to with questions or have reliable sources of information. If they don't know it, they know someone who knows it.” Here, the non-fellow also elevates that fellows are those who are well connected in the organization, not only knowledgeable themselves but also possessing great awareness of where to find information when necessary.

Focus group participants explained their fellow colleagues are also eager to share their knowledge with other educators in their schools. Non-fellows in different focus groups noted:

Well, the best way to impact students can be to impact other staff. So, he's very good about sharing ideas—always sits at the lunch table and talks instead of hiding in his room: "Oh, I tried this and it worked. I did this, I did this." He likes to share what he learns at stuff like this all the time. And that benefits kids throughout the building.

I think her personality naturally drove her to [TeachMichigan], if that makes sense. [She is] more approachable than the coach. [...] Part of the goal was to attract high impact people. That's who she is. She wants other people to do better and she's not bragging on herself, but she says "I had high test scores when I was in the classroom because I knew how to prep my students. So I want to pass that on so I can teach other teachers how to get the most out of their students.

These non-fellows explained that a major strength of their fellow colleague—and a key reason why they see these fellows to be high-impact educators—is their willingness to extend their instructional and pedagogical knowledge outside of their own classroom and share it with other teachers across the building. They note the fellows they interact with are eager to see the educators around them be successful because they see this as fundamental to broader organizational improvement.

Lifelong Learners

Focus group participants noted their fellow colleagues are always looking to grow and improve their craft as educators even when they already view them as excellent educators. They see fellows as lifelong learners who always see room to enhance their teaching skills. One non-fellow explained,

She does read a lot and she loves to be up to date. Like, "Oh, this is the approach that we should be using, this and that," which I respect because man, I don't really have that.

Interestingly, this non-fellow sees their fellow colleague's commitment to continue learning as a point of distinction and respect noting not all educators, including this non-fellow, have the drive to continue to hone their craft. Another non-fellow explained that a fellow colleague has both the goal of personal growth, but also encourages other educators around her to stretch and grow:

And I feel like the fifth grade teacher I was referring to, she is 100% a high-impact person looking to improve her practice, asks questions of others, "Is this the way we're supposed to do this?" Or even sometimes calls people out like, "Hey, I'm pretty sure that we're supposed to do it this way. I just want to make sure that we're all on the same page." She

doesn't do it in necessarily a rude way, but just, "I want to make sure that we're all getting the same out of it, that we're supposed to get out of it. I want to make sure the kids are getting out of it what we're supposed to be delivering.

Here, the non-fellow explains this fellow knows how to support growth in other educators first by modeling what it looks like to strive for continuous improvement in one's own practice, and second by asking thoughtful questions and holding colleagues accountable. Interestingly, the non-fellow also notes the fellow's ability to do this in a way that isn't taken personally but grounded in a desire to better support students.

Always Striving to Improve

While non-fellows generally spoke about their fellow colleagues in positive terms, three focus groups noted that some of their fellow colleagues are "overachievers who are working extremely hard already" and "stressed out but enjoy what they do." They explain fellows can also be hard on themselves, particularly as it pertains to how their students are faring. One non-fellow noted:

She is one of those people who is 100% on top of her game but worries a lot about the data and constantly feels like she's failing herself and her students because her data doesn't match up with the growth that she sees physically day to day. [...] I think she's amazing at her job. However, I think she personally is down on herself when she doesn't need to be because she is a success but is so drowned down by the data. I've had to tell this person multiple times, "Yeah, but is that really what you're looking for? Or are you looking for growth? Did you look at the growth?" And she's like, "Well, no, I looked at the proficiency." Oh yeah, okay. Proficiency is one thing, but growth is another. [...] She wanted to do [TeachMichigan] because she is such a, "how can I better myself for my students" type person. So I see that as a positive, but she really overdoes it and overextends herself to the point where she feels like she's failing when she's very much not.

This interviewee noted that their fellow colleague is an excellent educator but holds herself and her students to a high standard, which this non-fellow interprets as being too hard on herself.

Another non-fellow expressed how much her fellow colleague's "perfectionist" tendencies are colliding with the demands of the TeachMichigan fellowship:

She's on the National Board Certification track. And she's constantly telling me how swamped she is. [...] So she's recorded herself a bazillion times and it's never good enough. [...] You might be a little more, right? "I look really fat in that angle." I don't care. It is what it is here. Here you go. It's what I got. That makes me sound terrible. Anyway, so I know that's just her experience, but she's also incredibly smart and has tons of years

of experience and she feels like she's drowning doing this. So that totally put me off ever pursuing my National Board Certification.

To this non-fellow, their fellow colleague is a talented and experienced educator but is putting a lot of pressure on herself to meet the standards of National Board Certification. Interestingly, witnessing their respected colleague go through the process of pursuing National Board Certification through TeachMichigan appears to have prompted this non-fellow to rule out pursuing National Board Certification for themselves moving forward.

Critical Descriptions of Fellow

It is worth noting that while non-fellow focus group participants generally felt that the fellows they knew to be high-impact educators, there was one focus group that described one of the fellows they knew in their school in more critical terms:

Very negative [...] complains all the time. Stirs the pot, calls the union, calls the governor on any little thing [...] just whining so hard. "We have to do this, we have to do this. It's so hard." It reminds me of my attention seeking students basically.

However, the non-fellows in this focus group also noted "even the [fellow] that's negative, she makes good with certain students [and has good] rapport. Seems passionate about the subject. Absolutely [passionate about] teaching."

Non-Fellows' Perceptions of the Influence of TeachMichigan

In this section we examine focus group participants' perspectives on TeachMichigan's influence on fellows and their broader school communities. We analyze these perspectives through the lens of TeachMichigan's theory of change by examining how the program's core components influence teaching practices, leadership development, educator wellbeing, collaborative practices, access to resources and support, and collegiality in partner schools. Additionally, we explore whether and how non-fellows see TeachMichigan improving their TeachMichigan fellow colleagues' practices and student outcomes.

Educators demonstrated varying levels of awareness of TeachMichigan fellows in their buildings. In all but one focus groups, more than half of the participants were aware of one or more colleagues who are TeachMichigan fellows. The depth of educators' knowledge about fellows and their impacts on the broader school community was linked to their level of direct interaction. Some educators noted that being in different grade levels or content areas limited their awareness of fellows' practices and school level impacts. These varying levels of awareness may suggest that while educators who are TeachMichigan fellows are generally known by colleagues in their buildings, the impacts of the program, at least at early stages, may be most visible to those with whom they work alongside or have regular interactions with.

Non-Fellow Perceptions of TeachMichigan's Impact on Fellows' Practices

Focus group participants observed some changes in fellows after beginning TeachMichigan that may be attributable to participation in the program. These perceptions center around changes in fellows' teaching practices, leadership development, and personal wellbeing.

Teaching Practices

Educators noted positive changes in fellows' teaching practices since beginning TeachMichigan. For example, participants in one focus group noted how one fellow has begun engaging in reflective practices by actively seeking out feedback on their work from colleagues since beginning the program. They described how the program has "really opened up some vulnerability" for this fellow and has resulted in a "shift in [their] practice to make sure that all students are learning." Early career educators may be particularly impacted by the program. As one educator noted of a fellow in their second year of teaching, "I've seen a lot of big difference in [fellow] and how [they're] teaching more confidently now." They attributed this change to participation in TeachMichigan, explaining "I've observed [them] before, and [they] have grown a lot, and I think this has something to do with it" since "there's nothing else new." These perceptions suggest that participation in TeachMichigan is improving the teaching practices of fellows by improving reflective practices and building confidence. This further suggests that TeachMichigan professional development has the potential to achieve program goals of improving educator and student outcomes.

Leadership Development

Fellows have been observed taking on new leadership roles and demonstrating leadership skills since beginning TeachMichigan. For example, a participant in one focus group noted a fellow colleague has taken on new leadership roles, such as becoming "science chair for the district" and "took on [leading] the science steering committee." Another fellow who has recently taken on a new leadership role at their school was recognized as consistently seeking out opportunities to engage with and support their colleagues. One educator described how this fellow has been exhibiting supportive leadership skills: "all the emails, stopping by your classroom, "Hey, you need anything [...], if you want the coaching opportunities, if you need to have, whether it's just chatting, reflecting, you want her to come into your room and observe and whatever the case may be." Other educators described this fellow as "someone they go to all the time" for mentorship, and "super helpful [...]" as a coach." One noted how the fellow was both emotionally and pedagogically supportive of them in helping to incorporate technology into their teaching through lesson planning. While educators were unable to directly attribute these activities to their participation in the program, they noted that "the program is doing her a heck of a good job" and "whatever she's getting [from TeachMichigan] she's bringing back and using it here" so "kudos to TeachMichigan." These observations suggest TeachMichigan is enhancing fellows' leadership

development through encouraging formal role advancement and enhancing leadership skills, in alignment with the program's goal of empowering educators.

Personal Wellbeing

TeachMichigan's perceived impact on fellows' personal wellbeing varied across focus group participants. They noted that some fellows appear "more healthy emotionally" while others appear to be experiencing higher stress levels resulting from participation in the program. One educator described the increased stress levels of a fellow, "I'm surprised [fellow] hasn't pulled [their] hair out, I'm just to the point like, please stop, oh my god [fellow] you're recording was fine." Another educator suggested a fellow "lost all their hair" since beginning the program. Increased stress levels for fellows resulting from participation were expected by educators, as one explained "I think that's assumed or talked about before they joined the program." These observations suggest that while TeachMichigan may be positively impacting the personal wellbeing of some fellows, the program's workload may be creating additional stress for others. This suggests that additional support may be necessary for fellows to manage the stress experienced from trying to meet program expectations.

Impact of TeachMichigan on Fellows' Schools

Non-fellow educators noted the contributions fellows have made to their schools since beginning TeachMichigan. They note fellow colleagues positively contributed to school-level leadership, professional development, and support systems. Focus group participants in one focus group raised concerns about how TeachMichigan is shaping school culture.

Leadership

Non-fellow educators noted the impact of the expanded leadership roles fellows have taken on in their schools since beginning TeachMichigan. They observed fellows' increased involvement in administrative decisionmaking, specifically around the choice of a new curriculum. As one educator explained, "they've been more involved with meetings with admin and have been more in the light of other people outside of our school." Fellows were seen as a "deciding factor" in curriculum choice as "they had a chance to pilot the curriculum or have a voice in the pilot and what was chosen." This suggests that participation in TeachMichigan correlates with influential leadership opportunities that enable them to drive systemic changes in the instructional practices within their schools. These instructional improvements could potentially impact student outcomes, in line with the theory of change.

Professional Development

Non-fellow educators identified a potential way for fellows to improve professional development opportunities within their school. They expressed a desire for a "follow up" from fellows who have attended TeachMichigan events where they "talk to the staff about what they're experiencing," noting "that's how it's going to impact the rest." This suggests TeachMichigan could enhance its impact on partner schools by working

with school leaders to create opportunities for fellows to share their program learning with colleagues at their schools. This could provide additional leadership roles for fellows and expand the impact of TeachMichigan's professional development.

Support Systems

Per non-fellows, TeachMichigan fellows have strengthened the support systems at their schools. However, educators noted challenges with directly attributing fellows' practices to participation in TeachMichigan. One educator described how a fellow has "really been impactful to the school," by supporting "teachers through all of the logistics of [the] nightmare" of standardized testing. However, they questioned whether this stemmed from the program noting, "I don't know if that's the program because that's just her job description." This educator described how this fellow's "personality naturally drove her to the program" as they are a "high-impact person," in line with TeachMichigan's goal of attracting high-impact educators. Educators described the fellow as "more approachable" than other school support staff, noting how their encouraging feedback inspired colleagues to share effective teaching practices and help other teachers "get the most out of their students." These observations suggest that fellow effectiveness in strengthening school support systems may stem from a combination of TeachMichigan's programming and effectiveness in identifying high-impact educators in the selection process.

School Culture

Non-fellow educators in one focus group expressed concerns that the TeachMichigan was "not so good for morale" during the time application decisions were being made. One educator explained that when interview decisions were being shared within their building, they "saw some low faces" that led to "depression" amongst staff who applied and were not advancing to the interview phase. Another educator described how this negatively impacted collegiality in the building by stating, "there will be some bitterness because some people are moving on, they're going to be going and doing these fun things in Detroit and in these hotels and they're a group and then we're left" resulting in a "we're left behind camaraderie." These perceptions suggest the selectivity of TeachMichigan could negatively impact school culture by creating divisions between educators in the building, with one explicitly stating, "we don't want that in our school at all."

The Potential of TeachMichigan to Address Educator Workforce Challenges

Given TeachMichigan's overarching goal of improving the teacher workforce in the state of Michigan by retaining excellent educators in hard-to-staff schools and districts, we sought to investigate non-fellows' perceptions around TeachMichigan's potential to address educator workforce challenges in their districts and the state more broadly. During focus groups, we asked participants whether they think a program like TeachMichigan has the potential to either support or undermine efforts

to improve education in their district and whether they think a program like this has the potential to address educator workforce problems in Michigan more broadly.

TeachMichigan's Potential to Address Educator Workforce Challenges

Focus group participants voiced several different ways they felt TeachMichigan could work to address educator workforce challenges locally and at the state level. Specifically, they noted that TeachMichigan could help retain strong educators through two key mechanisms: increased compensation through the TeachMichigan stipend and support for early career teachers.

Increasing Compensation through the TeachMichigan Stipend

There was broad acknowledgement among focus group participants that teachers are not well paid, and that increasing compensation is a key aspect of improving teacher retention. Participants across several focus groups felt that TeachMichigan had potential to address educator workforce challenges due to the stipend fellows receive. One non-fellow noted:

Pay for what we're worth. In order to get people to stay or be in education there needs to be pay. So I feel like that [TeachMichigan] is a good way to retain--absolutely. If there were other things like that or something coming through that raised salaries, I think that that's how you retain teachers. I think that that's one of the major issues is that a lot is expected, and the compensation doesn't match what is expected.

Another focus group found the TeachMichigan stipend to be an effective retention strategy because it allows teachers the income they need to cover expenses. Put bluntly by one non-fellow, "When you're looking at the money, it's a heck of incentive because we got to pay our bills. I like my refrigerator being full."

In a similar vein, two non-fellows in one focus group explained that the stipend could make all the difference in terms of paying bills through the duration of the fellowship:

Non-fellow A: I think [the TeachMichigan stipend is] great. I like how they get paid. It's not like, oh, you get paid the lump sum at the end. You're supporting them all the way through, and it increases. I think that's great.

Non-fellow B: I think that that encourages retention too, because you can pay your bills and it's like life is a lot better.

These non-fellows see low compensation as a central problem leading to teacher turnover. Non-fellows thought increased compensation through the TeachMichigan stipend may allow teachers to cover routine expenses they would have not been able to pay with their base salary, thereby leading to higher retention at least for the duration of the program.

TeachMichigan and Support for Early Career Educators

Non-fellows thought TeachMichigan could support teacher retention generally, but thought it stood to make an especially meaningful impact for teachers early in their careers. They expressed that teachers just coming into the classroom are often not prepared for the realities of teaching and also require additional support. One non-fellow noted:

If this program will give them more ideas, I think it will address a problem that I could remember my first two years of teaching. I didn't know it was totally different from when you just get out of school and you're like, okay, this is not nothing like the education classes. And you're like, whoa. And if you are in an inner city school or a poor school. So something like this for a new teacher will be perfect.

Here, this non-fellow connects to her own experiences as a novice teacher, noting not only the challenges of learning how to teach and the disconnect between teacher training experiences and the classroom, but also the amplified pressures felt by new educators in schools that serve high concentrations of poor students.

Another non-fellow pointed specifically to the issue of higher teacher turnover for those who are in their first few years of teaching and felt that TeachMichigan could really help provide the supports needed to get teachers through this challenging period:

Do you know if they accept more people to the early educator track than the other two? Because that one, I feel like the new educators, there's so many that could be supported. I don't know the answer to that. That one I feel like is a big one. You see a lot of need for that. I feel like the other two [tracks] are definitely important, but I think that that one would specifically be a way [to retain more teachers]. I think that the problem compared to the past with teacher retention is we're not getting and retaining new teachers. They're coming and leaving because of all the issues that we've talked about. It's not just people retiring. It's that we're not getting new people and we're not keeping 'em. So I think if [new teachers are] supported, that would be a big one.

This non-fellow found TeachMichigan to be a solution particularly well-suited to address the teacher retention problem for early career teachers. In another focus group, non-fellows echoed this idea as they described the challenges they face supporting new teachers in their school, one of whom is a TeachMichigan Early Career Educator fellow:

But from what I've seen so far, it is encouraging because I was [Fellow's] mentor last year and there's really not a whole lot I can do to help guide her to help her grow as a teacher because I have my own room. And so if she's got a bunch of seasoned teachers that can talk to her and coach her along, it could be a good thing. [...] I think it's a good start, especially for new teachers. I've seen a lot big difference in [Fellow] and how she's

teaching more confidently now and I don't know if it has anything to do with this, but it's the only thing that's new. [...] I've observed her before, and she has grown a lot and I think this has something to do with it.

Here again, non-fellows call attention to the need to support new teachers and also the fact that current approaches to providing this support, such as having a more senior teacher colleague serve as a mentor, are falling short of providing the needed support to retain these teachers. This non-fellow notes how TeachMichigan has been especially beneficial to his mentee, who he did not have the opportunity to support as well as he would have liked given his own responsibilities as a classroom teacher.

Focus group participants voiced several different ways they felt TeachMichigan could work to address educator workforce challenges locally and at the state level. Specifically, they noted that TeachMichigan could help retain strong educators through two key mechanisms: increased pay through the TeachMichigan stipend and support for early career teachers.

TeachMichigan's Limitations to Addressing Educator Workforce Challenges

While focus group participants thought TeachMichigan had the potential to address educator workforce challenges, they also surfaced constraints to this potential. Some focus groups noted TeachMichigan being a relatively small program given the magnitude of educator workforce challenges in the state. One fellow described TeachMichigan as a “band aid [on a] deep cut.” Another non-fellow explained:

I think what [TeachMichigan] is trying to solve, [...] it's going to take a different change in a lot of things to make something like this even more effective. Because I feel like you're trying to put a finger in a dike and you got a dam that's breaking loose on you, and I think it's stopping this hole, but you got a whole river flowing through the bottom of it.

Additionally, non-fellows raised the temporary nature of TeachMichigan as a limitation noting this program does not afford fellows long-term financial stability.

Non-fellows surfaced some specific critiques noting TeachMichigan's limited ability to address poor working conditions educators face day to day in their districts and schools and questions about whether TeachMichigan is targeting educators who are really at risk of turning over.

TeachMichigan's Limited Potential to Overcome Poor Working Conditions

Across focus groups, a common refrain from non-fellows was that TeachMichigan's primary focus is on retaining and developing a small subset of educators but not on shifting broader working conditions in schools and districts. They felt that this limitation would get in the way of educator retention goals and be an obstacle to fellows implementing what they learn through TeachMichigan professional development.

In terms of retention, non-fellows noted their belief that the TeachMichigan stipend and professional learning opportunities will not be enough to retain educators where

working conditions are poor and educators are undervalued. Non-fellows in separate focus groups explained:

It doesn't matter if I go sit in this [TeachMichigan] cohort. [...] I don't feel supported [in my district]. So it doesn't matter what I learn if I come back here and I don't get the things that I need. So I think there has to be some type of balance between this program and the schools who actually offered this as an opportunity for their teachers—we got to be shown that they care about us and they really want us to stay.

[TeachMichigan] is not going to solve that problem because I'm going to give you some cohort time with some guys who want to teach. But at the end of the day, I'm still back here at [School] to teach, and if my situation here is not good, I'm going to leave anyway. This will maybe keep me in the game, in my opinion, maybe a few more years and a few could be two, one, it could be until I get done with this and I cash out and then I walk away.

In two separate focus groups, non-fellows reaffirmed the importance of working conditions noting limited supports specifically around behavioral challenges teachers face:

I'd say half the problem is the crazy students I know if the students were less crazy, we've got a fantastic teacher in this district, one of the best I've met in my life who's leaving just because the students are out of control. It's not about the money. Her husband works, she can't deal with the insanity and we're losing a gem. I'm sorry, that Top tier teacher and this wouldn't help her. She's amazing. She just needs to be able to teach and she can't because kids run laps around the room and punch each other. And when you have that many behaviors in a classroom, you have to have more help. The numbers are too high for the behaviors that we have.

Behaviors are a big problem. I just had a class where the whole time you're preventing a kid from smacking someone's head against the wall. They do it every single day. They shouldn't be here. [...] Those kind of behaviors do lead to burnout. [...] I don't think [TeachMichigan] addresses the real reason teachers are quitting and that's why I know quite a few mid-career teachers that are leaving because of that issue. This is not going to fix that issue.

In these rather pointed quotes, non-fellows make clear that they believe TeachMichigan's potential to retain excellent educators is limited if teachers face difficult working conditions day to day in their schools. It is important to note here that while a broader goal of TeachMichigan is school/organizational-level improvement, non-fellows did not recognize this focus and saw TeachMichigan primarily as a program that affects individual educators.

Additionally, non-fellows noted that the professional learning TeachMichigan fellows experience may be put to limited use if it conflicts with district norms and requirements.

We would go off [to TeachMichigan events] and be inspired. We would go off and have community and we would come back to so much less and not be able to utilize any of it. [...] We need our district to back us. We need our administrators to back us. And I think in this school our administrators do back us and they are very supportive of these kinds of programs. However, they themselves are held to the district standards and are threatened with the superintendent, who can walk into any classroom at any time. You better be on task, you better be doing the workshop model, you better have your targets posted. And so even though our admin typically is pretty supportive, doesn't really matter because this piece of the solution puzzle is not supported by our district or by our curriculum that is so outdated. [...] So it's just like this is really cool. Does downtown know? Is downtown going to support these changes?

Here, this non-fellow explains how participating in TeachMichigan may even lead to greater frustration as educators because fellows will have learned better ways of serving students but may not be able to put these into practice due to constraints imposed by the district.

TeachMichigan Targets Educators Who Are Unlikely to Turn Over

As noted in an earlier section, non-fellows felt that their teacher colleagues selected to be TeachMichigan fellows were in fact high-impact educators who were making meaningful contributions in their schools. In one focus group, two non-fellows dialogued about their perception that they do not believe this group of educators is really at risk of turning over.

I think this is going to appeal to somebody who still wants to teach anyway. I don't know that this is going to change the mind of somebody who's feeling like this just isn't for me anymore because it has an end date in terms of how much they can make and it doesn't change their condition. And so if they don't love teaching, then at best this is a band aid.

Later in the focus group, the same non-fellow reiterated:

I think that this is a great program, but I think you're going to get the people who love where they're at. I don't know. And I think committed educators are going to love this, but the folks you're trying to really get to stay in the game, I just think they'll see the end game in this and they may stand for the paycheck and they say, I'm done with this commitment to these guys. I'm outta here. And they just use plan this. I don't mean to sound pessimistic, but I think they'll plan this out as an exit plan and say,

you know what? I hang in here long enough, I get the check, I can plan my exit strategy, and I get the last check.

Another non-fellow in the same focus group concurred:

If you're trying to reach the [teachers] that are exhausted emotionally and stuff like that, this will only hold them if they see something that they can get out of it and leave. But yeah, this will reach teachers that said, "Okay, I'm going to be here for the long haul, and this will help me become a better person and teacher and reach kids that maybe I couldn't reach before.

In this exchange, two non-fellows noted that TeachMichigan will likely appeal to those educators who are highly committed to teaching in their districts and unlikely to leave, thereby minimizing the likelihood TeachMichigan will retention rates for high-impact educators. They also surface a concern that less committed teachers could leverage TeachMichigan as part of their "exit strategy" from the district or profession.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHMICHIGAN

Our analysis of non-fellow educator perspectives reveals several important considerations for TeachMichigan as the program continues to grow. By working alongside fellows every day, our focus group participants were able to offer unique insights into TeachMichigan's recruitment, implementation, and potential impact. These perspectives are particularly important for understanding how program information flows through informal channels, identifying barriers to participation, and surfacing potential implementation challenges that may be difficult to obtain directly from current fellows. Below we offer some key considerations that emerged from our analysis of these perspectives. We believe these insights can inform TeachMichigan staff as they seek to improve their approach for increasing educator participation and maximizing program impact moving forward.

Addressing Information Gaps for Prospective Fellows

Addressing information gaps expressed by focus group participants could better inform potential fellows' participation decisions. Some key information focus group participants noted as missing from recruitment materials that may impact TeachMichigan application and participation decisions include:

- 1) **Clear information and resources so prospective fellows could understand tax implications of the TeachMichigan stipend.** Focus group participants were concerned with the tax implications of the stipend, with some believing that half would go to taxes. Providing clear guidance on the stipend's structure so prospective fellows could better investigate and understand personal tax implications may be helpful. TeachMichigan might consider consulting with a tax professional to create a guiding document to help prospective and current fellows better understand tax implications and expected take-home amounts. Additionally, TeachMichigan might consider

having a tax professional available to answer questions in this vein, especially since many teachers are likely unable to afford the services of a tax professional themselves.

- 2) **A detailed schedule of program commitments and dates.** Providing information on time commitments, deliverables, in person and virtual meeting dates, and flexibility policies would allow potential fellows to make more informed decisions about applying to TeachMichigan. As focus group participants explicitly stated, a lack of clarity on commitments and dates prohibited them from choosing to apply to TeachMichigan due to concerns about being able to keep their commitments. Including these details may allow potential fellows to make more informed decisions about applying.
- 3) **Cohort-specific professional development information.** Providing information on cohort-specific professional development content could help educators better assess the alignment between TeachMichigan and their career goals. This may be particularly impactful for experienced educators who question the value of TeachMichigan's content beyond existing professional development opportunities provided by their districts. This also may better inform potential fellows considering the Aspiring Leaders cohort who question the extent of the cohort's focus on training for formal administrative roles.

Leaning into Flywheel Recruitment Strategy by Partnering with Current Fellows

Current recruitment strategies may be limited in their effectiveness, with formal district communications and school level information sessions having a limited impact on focus group participants' awareness and knowledge of TeachMichigan. Formal strategies, including administrator emails, were noted by focus group participants to be largely ineffective until coupled with recommendations from current fellows. Instead, current TeachMichigan fellows serve as the primary and most influential source of program information, indicating the informal flywheel approach may be a more effective and influential recruitment strategy. These findings suggest TeachMichigan could enhance recruitment efforts by bridging formal and informal recruitment strategies. Involving current fellows in formal email campaigns or information sessions could generate greater interest and participation, particularly in schools where current TeachMichigan fellows serve.

Communicating the Benefits of National Board Certification

A consistent theme across focus groups was the desire for a cohort directed towards experienced educators who want to improve their practice without pursuing National Board Certification or leadership roles. Focus group participants expressed interest in a cohort focusing on instructional techniques, allowing experienced educators to grow professionally through exposure to current educational strategies while staying in

their classrooms. While one possible response is to create an additional cohort as suggested by some focus group participants, another is to better communicate the purposes and benefits of National Board Certification, which is quite well aligned with what experienced educators indicated they are looking for. Many focus group participants expressed a limited understanding of National Board Certification's requirements and benefits, which is unsurprising given the lack of state-level initiatives around National Board Certification in Michigan and the limited number of National Board Certified educators in the state. TeachMichigan could enhance potential fellows' understanding of National Board Certification by providing clear information about the certification process and its professional benefits including prestige and impact on career advancement opportunities. This information could also detail Michigan's \$10,000 National Board Certification bonus for teachers in Title I schools, while being clear that the bonus is contingent on the continuation of legislature support.

Expanding Focus on High-Impact and High-Potential Early Career Educators

Non-fellows noted they thought TeachMichigan stood to be particularly impactful for educators who are in the early stages of their careers. They noted that these educators require the greatest levels of support, which is often not available to them in their schools, and they are most at risk of turning over. While it did not come up in focus groups, it is important to note that current compensation for early educators is especially low, arguably making them even more likely to leave their current teaching position or leave the profession altogether, than early career teachers in other states. As noted in previous EPIC research, TeachMichigan's \$10,000 annual stipend during the first two years represents between 21.7% and 29.2% of the minimum teacher's salary across partner districts. This percentage increases in the third year when fellows receive \$15,000, ranging from 32.6% to 43.8% of the minimum salary. Across all three years of fellowship, TeachMichigan increases total compensation for new teachers by one-fourth to one-third of their base salary (Mavrogordato & Burns, 2024). In sum, the TeachMichigan stipend is especially meaningful to teachers at the early stages of their career. Moving forward, TeachMichigan may consider working to invest more heavily in this particular piece of the teacher pipeline, focusing on educators who are in years 3-6 of their teaching career.

Broadening TeachMichigan's Impact at the School and District Levels

Focus group participants largely viewed TeachMichigan as a program that seeks to develop and retain individual educators but were less clear about TeachMichigan's medium term goals of improving the broader educational environment. Focus group participants expressed a strong desire for current TeachMichigan fellows to share what they have learned through TeachMichigan with colleagues. As the first group of TeachMichigan fellows prepares to enter Year 3 of their fellowship which does not

contain structured professional learning, TeachMichigan could work with school and district leaders to create opportunities for this knowledge sharing, expanding the impact of the program beyond individual fellows to benefit the broader school and district community. These opportunities could create new leadership opportunities for fellows while increasing interaction amongst high-impact educators and expand existing professional networks inside schools. Additionally, these opportunities could enable fellows to build coalitions with non-fellow educators in their building that may be leveraged in future attempts to engage in systemic change. These fellow-driven learning opportunities could also help address concerns about the program's selectivity by making TeachMichigan's benefits more widely available, shifting perceptions from serving a select few to supporting school, district and even statewide educator development.

Special Considerations When Implementing TeachMichigan in Some Contexts

How TeachMichigan is implemented may require additional consideration in some contexts, particularly in areas with lower educator salaries and/or geographical isolation. In contexts where the stipend's value relative to educator salaries is high, and the stipend has a larger impact on educators' total salaries, the program leads to greater inequity in teacher pay within the schools where fellows work, which may lead to fragmentation between teachers and undermine efforts to improve school culture. The negative impacts to educators' personal wellbeing when not selected for TeachMichigan, and the "left behind camaraderie" described by focus group participants in one district, suggests a need to manage the organizational implications of TeachMichigan carefully in certain contexts.

Continuing to Attend to Fellows' Wellbeing

TeachMichigan has prioritized educator wellness as part of their programming for all fellows. Non-fellow perspectives indicate this emphasis is well justified not only because of challenging working conditions educators in TeachMichigan districts face every day, but also because of how busy, committed, and "overachieving" their fellow colleagues tend to be. Continuing to prioritize educator wellness through TeachMichigan is supported by non-fellow focus group data. Additionally, it was evident in focus groups that working conditions vary substantially across schools and districts where fellows work. Moving forward, TeachMichigan may want to consider strategies to address the increased stress levels some fellows were observed experiencing from meeting TeachMichigan demands. This may be particularly impactful for those educators who are working in schools with especially challenging working conditions that contribute to higher baseline stress levels. The program may consider regular check-ins around challenging tasks required of fellows, providing additional support for deliverables fellows identify as stressful, such as video submissions, and optional wellness-focused programming or activities outside of regular TeachMichigan professional learning sessions.

REFERENCES

Mavrogordato, M., & Burns, J. (2024). *TeachMichigan fellows' compensation in context: Perceptions and insights*. Education Policy Innovation Collaborative, Michigan State University.