Uncovering Policies and Practices in Michigan Charter Public Schools that Outperform Expectations

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This report presents three case studies of public charter schools authorized by the Central Michigan University (CMU) Center for Charter Schools (CCS) that exceeded academic expectations during the 2023-24 school year.

Key findings include:
- A strong culture of shared values and supportive leadership was foundational to effective learning environments.
- Family partnerships and student ownership were central to meaningful engagement strategies.
- Schools consistently emphasized the systematic use of data to inform instruction, with adjustments made based on formative and summative assessments.

Recommendations include:
- Consider how shared values, behavioral systems, and family engagement structures contribute to a positive and inclusive culture.
- Reflect on how administrator dispositions, professional learning, and communication practices build trust and support high-quality instruction.
- Examine how student-centered instruction, data use, and relationships foster engagement and academic growth.

Introduction

The Central Michigan University (CMU) Center for Charter Schools (CCS) contracted Basis Policy Research (Basis) to conduct case studies of three CMU public charter schools that outperformed student achievement expectations during the 2023-24 school year. This report synthesizes findings from those case studies, examining (1) the policies and systems these schools instituted to support teaching and learning, (2) the practices teachers and leaders use to foster a positive learning environment, and (3) the strategies the schools use for engaging families and students. Findings from the case studies offer CMU CCS and authorized schools insights into how public charter schools that outperform expectations create and sustain effective educational environments for students and staff.

Methods

Sample. A three-step process was used to select schools for this study. First, schools with a median conditional growth percentile above the CMU network average on the spring 2024 NWEA MAP reading and math assessments were identified. This resulted in nine schools being eligible for the study. Next, a regression analysis modeled spring 2024 ELA and math M-STEP achievement as a function of the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Five schools with residuals above the regression line in ELA and math were identified. Additionally, one school with a unique enrollment system and shared the same charter management organization as another school was excluded, as well as a second school serving a smaller percentage of English language learners than another eligible school within the same network. This process resulted in three schools that outperformed academic expectations on local benchmark assessments and are representative of the diverse contexts and student populations within the CMU CCS network.

Data Sources. This report utilizes two main data sources—focus group transcripts and school documents—to provide insights into effective policies, systems, and practices implemented by the three schools in the case study, which can be shared with other schools in the CMU CCS network to support continuous improvement efforts.

> **Focus Groups:** In February 2025, thirteen semi-structured focus groups were held with a total of 40 teachers and 17 leaders from three schools. Ten of the focus groups were completed virtually via Microsoft Teams, while three focus groups were conducted in person (See Appendix A for additional details on the focus groups). School leaders securely shared personnel rosters with the research team to support participant recruitment. A stratified random selection of teachers by grade level and content area was conducted within each school to identify participants. For example, in one school serving students in grades K-12, eight teachers from grades K-5, three from grades 6-8, and five from grades 9-12 were interviewed. Coordination with school leaders was undertaken to identify 7-10 staff members per school who held leadership roles (e.g., assistant principal, grade-level chair, MTSS/PBIS coordinator) for invitation to the leader focus groups.
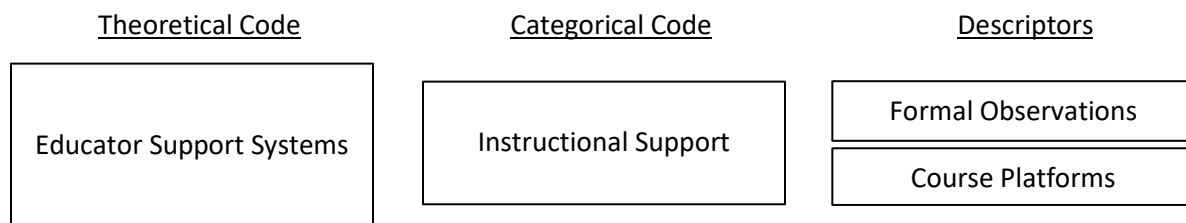>
> Focus groups were conducted to gather insights into the policies, systems, and practices that support teaching, learning, and parent or guardian engagement within each school. For this study, focus group discussions with both teachers and leaders explored themes including school policies and systems, learning environment, engagement, cognitive challenge, research-based strategies, assessment and adjustment, and supports and professional learning. The instruments used for these focus groups are provided in Appendix B. All focus group participants were compensated with a $25 Amazon e-gift card.
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> **School Documents:** A systematic review of each school's key documents, including teacher handbooks, parent and student handbooks, professional development calendars, and other relevant policies, was also conducted. This review aimed to complement focus group data by offering formal, institutional insights into the policies, systems, and practices that support student success. As a result, a more complete understanding of school

practices was gained, and additional context was provided for interpreting themes that emerged from the focus groups.

Analytic Strategy. Data from focus groups and document reviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a common method for identifying patterns within qualitative data. Focus group transcripts were coded for recurring themes related to school policies, systems, and practices. ATLAS.ti was used to open code the qualitative data, creating a coding rubric that was then applied to the full set of focus transcripts and reviewed documents. The coding rubric was structured hierarchically with theoretical codes, categorical codes, and descriptive codes. Descriptive codes, the most detailed level, captured observable elements within the data. Categorical codes were based on patterns among descriptive codes, while theoretical codes, the highest level, organized relationships across categorical and descriptive codes into overarching themes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Sample coding rubric structure.

Theoretical Code	Categorical Code	Descriptors
Educator Support Systems	Instructional Support	Formal Observations
		Course Platforms

To ensure rigor, coding was conducted iteratively, allowing themes to emerge from the data and ensuring that findings accurately reflect stakeholders' perspectives. A subset of transcripts was independently coded by two members of the research team, followed by multiple rounds of discussion through which consensus was reached on theme definitions and coding application for review and validation. Finally, results were triangulated by comparing data from focus groups and document reviews within and across schools. An overview of the qualitative analysis of the focus group data and document review is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Qualitative analysis of focus group data and document review.

Step	Process
1	Audio recordings from focus groups were transcribed using Rev.com.
2	Focus group transcripts and documents received from schools were uploaded to ATLAS.ti for analysis.
3	One-third of the transcripts were randomly selected for initial analysis, and coding rubrics including descriptive, categorical, and theoretical codes were developed.
4	Coding rubrics were reconciled through meetings among the research team to create an agreed-upon initial coding rubric.
5	The initial coding rubric was applied separated by the research team to an additional one-third of the transcripts.
6	A second round of discussion was conducted to reconcile additional codes and remove those not consistently present in the data, resulting in a final coding rubric.
7	The final coding rubric was applied to the entirety of the qualitative data – transcripts and documentation.
8	Frequencies of themes were reported based on code usage throughout transcripts and documents.

Reporting. This report summarizes key findings from case studies of three schools and provides select recommendations based on these insights. The main findings are organized into four broad theoretical categories: (1) Learning Environment, (2) Engagement, (3) Research-Based Strategies & Cognitive Challenge, and (4) Assessment & Adjustment. These categories align with domains identified within the CMU CCS classroom observation tool. Each category includes specific codes representing the most significant themes identified through focus group analysis and document review.

This report provides a synthesis of key findings from the case studies of three public charter schools, along with select recommendations derived from those findings. Although each school operates in a different context, the analysis revealed a set of shared commitments and adaptive strategies that foster student growth and academic success. Overarching insights and interpretive themes are outlined below, organized around four main theoretical codes: learning environment, student engagement, research-based strategies and cognitive challenge, and assessment and adjustment (see Table 2). These themes demonstrate how schools that exceed expectations implemented a transparent, student-centered approach by aligning leadership, instruction, and data use within a culture of trust, responsiveness, and shared responsibility.

Table 2. Salient Theoretical and Categorical Codes Across Case Studies.

Theoretical Code	Categorical Code	Descriptors
Learning Environment	Collective Values	• Mission alignment and team buy-in • Shared decision-making process
	Administrator Dispositions	• Visibility and accessibility • Supportive, collaborative, and proactive leadership
	Communication Systems	• Regular staff meetings and updates • Transparent and open communication channels
	Behavior Systems	• Consistent implementation of behavior frameworks • Positive behavior incentives
	Non-Academic Support Systems	• Safe rooms and open-door policy • SEL and language resources
Engagement	Family Engagement	• Opportunities for families to get involved • Frequent communication with multiple platforms
	Engagement Strategies	• Recognition events or awards for students • Field trips, extracurriculars, and clubs
	Student Accountability	• Individual tracking and goal setting • Student-led parent conferences
	Instructional Practices	• Hands on activities and project-based learning • Real-world connections
Research-based Strategies & Cognitive Challenge	Professional Learning	• Access to relevant professional learning • Instructional coaching and modeling instruction
	Educator Support Systems	• Mentorship of new teachers • Peer collaboration opportunities
	Instructional Practices	• Critical and depth of knowledge questions • Modeling and guided practice
	Individualized Support	• Individualized learning plans • Small group instruction
Assessment & Adjustment	Data Infrastructure	• Grade-level, MTSS, and data team meetings • Accountability to making improvements
	Tiered Intervention	• Student identification and strategic grouping • Enrichment classes and tutoring opportunities
	Data Use	• Use of formative and summative assessments • Adjustment to Instruction
	Differentiation	• Utilization of diagnostic tools • Leveled assignments and instruction

■ School-level　　■ Classroom-level

Learning Environment

Across all three schools, a culture grounded in relationships and driven by values was identified as crucial for student success. While the specific behavior systems differed, such as PBIS, SEL supports, and Moral Focus programming, each was integrated into a larger culture of shared responsibilities and mutual respect. Importantly, these environments were not solely focused on compliance; they were co-created with students, often through tools like social contracts and student advisory systems that encouraged student agency and ownership.

Leadership visibility and approachability consistently emerged as key factors in shaping the school climate. School leaders demonstrated collaborative problem-solving, shared decision-making, and a willingness to take on frontline roles, reinforcing the connection between instructional and cultural leadership. As a result, trust was built, hierarchy was reduced, and conditions for shared accountability were established.

Engagement

Engagement was not seen as a one-time effort but as a continuous, school-wide strategy woven into lesson planning, family participation, and daily routines. Each school encouraged genuine student motivation through recognition systems that emphasized growth rather than performance and through teaching methods that connect learning to students' real-life experiences.

Family involvement was both strategic and culturally sensitive. Schools used multilingual communication tools, organized parent groups, and hosted community events to build trust and openness. The schools also stressed the importance of constant communication with families, sharing both areas for growth and recognizing positive student behaviors or performance. These initiatives positioned families not as passive recipients but as active partners in the learning process.

Student accountability systems, including grade trackers, student-led conferences, and goal-setting meetings, were more than just compliance tools. They functioned as developmental supports designed to encourage student reflection and responsibility.

Research-Based Strategies & Cognitive Challenge

Instructional rigor was achieved through the adaptive implementation of research-based practices. Modeling, guided practice, and project-based learning were emphasized across all three schools, with strategies tailored to their student populations and instructional contexts.

Professional learning was job-embedded, responsive, and frequently led by teachers. Examples include the use of external consultants and weekly professional development (School B), responsive professional learning aligned with teacher interests (School C), and the integration of coaching and peer observation (School A). These approaches demonstrated a commitment to continuous improvement and teacher agency.

Educator support systems, such as mentorship, collaborative planning, and real-time feedback, were established as core infrastructure to maintain instructional coherence and promote shared expertise.

Assessment & Adjustment

Intentional use of data was evident across all three schools to guide instructional decisions. Data was not used punitively but as a tool for reflection, collaboration, and targeted support. Teachers consistently used formative assessments to adapt instruction in real time, while leadership teams held regular data meetings to identify trends and coordinate interventions.

Tiered intervention systems were aligned with student needs and included supports such as remediation labs, elective prep classes, invite-only tutoring, and summer school. Importantly, these interventions were embedded within the school day and culture, rather than implemented as isolated or reactive measures.

Unique Policies, Practices, and Systems

While shared themes were identified across schools, each school also applied distinctive strategies that reflect its unique context, priorities, and student needs. These varied practices and their role in student success are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Unique Policies, Practices, and Systems Among Case Study Schools.

	School A	School B	School C
Grade-Level Placement	■		
No Cell Phone Policy		■	
Looping Assignments		■	
Designated Safe Spaces / Safe Rooms		■	■
Student-led Parent Teacher Conferences	■		
Invite-Only Tutoring and Summer School	■		
Student Mentors		■	■
Testing Environment Policy		■	■

Source: focus group transcripts and school documents; authors' analyses.

At School A, the use of a grade-level placement model was recognized as one of the most distinctive features. Leaders and teachers consistently cited this model as a key factor in the school's success. Emphasis was placed on accurate placement based on students' demonstrated proficiency at enrollment, and advancement was allowed only when grade-level standards were achieved. This model was created to ensure mastery of essential skills before moving to the next grade, helping instruction to be more properly tailored. Open and proactive communication with families and students was required, especially regarding expectations for placement, promotion, and retention. The model was closely connected to School A's invite-only tutoring and summer school programs, which were designed to provide targeted support for students with the greatest needs.

A student-led parent-teacher conference model was also implemented at School A to boost student accountability. This approach encouraged students to reflect on their academic performance, identify their strengths and areas for improvement, and take responsibility for their learning goals.

At School B, two distinct policies were observed: a no-cell-phone policy and looping assignments. The absence of mobile phones during the school day was reported to decrease distractions and boost student concentration. The looping model, in which teachers stay with the same group of students over multiple years, was seen as an effective strategy for strengthening relationships and improving instructional responsiveness, as teachers spend less time learning new student needs each year.

Schools B and C highlighted the importance of intentional testing environments in supporting student performance. School C scheduled standardized testing days by grade level to maintain a calm and focused atmosphere in the hallways, while School B used small group testing to reduce anxiety and improve concentration.

Both schools also highlighted the use of safe spaces and student mentorship programs as key components of their learning environments. At School C, designated classrooms were made available for students to access snacks or take breaks without question. At School B, dedicated safe rooms were established to provide confidential social-emotional support. Student mentorship programs were implemented at both schools, pairing students to foster peer support, build community, and provide additional academic and social scaffolding.

Based on a cross-case analysis of the three schools included in this study, a set of practical recommendations is offered for schools seeking to improve student outcomes through clear, student-centered systems. These recommendations are grounded in shared practices and structures observed across the three schools that outperform expectations. While each school's context is unique, the consistency and intentional nature of these practices suggest they could be applied to other schools aiming to build strong cultures, increase engagement, and improve instruction. The following guiding questions are provided to promote reflection and planning at the schoolwide, leadership, and classroom levels.

1 | Schoolwide Considerations

Across all three schools, clear and consistent schoolwide systems promoted positive learning environments, student engagement, and targeted academic support. These systems were not implemented as separate initiatives but were deeply embedded into daily routines and reinforced through shared norms and expectations. A deliberate alignment was evident among school values, operational routines, and instructional priorities. These included shared values, behavioral management frameworks, and systematic data use, all helping to create environments that combined high expectations with comprehensive support for student wellbeing.

Key practices observed:

- Strong school culture rooted in collective values
- Implementation of consistent behavior systems
- Data infrastructure and regular progress monitoring
- Tiered interventions and aligned student supports

Guiding Questions for Schools:

- Do we have clearly articulated values that are consistently reinforced among staff, students, and families?
- How does our current behavior management system support both academic and behavioral growth?
- What structures are in place for regular, actionable data review across grade levels and leadership?
- How do we identify and intervene with students who need additional academic or behavioral support?
- Are our family engagement efforts structured, strategic, and responsive to the needs of our community?
- How do we ensure coherence between our school's mission, systems, and daily practices?

2 | School Leader Considerations

Leader dispositions were identified as a key factor in school climate and staff satisfaction. Leaders in the case study schools were described as visible, approachable, and actively involved in teaching and learning, which helped build trust and reinforce a shared sense of accountability. Across all three schools, leadership played a vital role in implementing school values, supporting embedded professional learning, and creating an environment conducive to continuous improvement rooted in relational trust and shared responsibility.

Key practices observed:

- Approachable, hands-on leadership style
- Responsive professional development aligned to staff and school needs
- Strategic staffing models (e.g., looping teachers, peer mentorships)
- Communication systems that promote transparency and shared ownership

Guiding Questions for School Leaders:

- How am I building visibility and trust among staff, students, and families?
- In what ways do I collaborate with teachers to address instructional or behavioral challenges?
- Is professional development in my school responsive, job-embedded, and tailored to staff needs?
- How do my communication practices foster transparency and shared accountability?
- Are systems in place to support new staff and promote collaboration?
- How do I model the values and expectations I ask others to uphold?

3 | Teacher & Classroom Considerations

Teachers in the case study schools showed a strong dedication to student-centered instruction, cognitive challenges, and differentiated support. Instructional methods, from project-based learning and small-group work to data-driven individual goal setting, were intentionally designed to meet the needs of diverse learners while promoting student accountability and engagement. Teachers highlighted the importance of building strong relationships with students and frequently used formative assessment data to adjust pacing, strategic groupings, and instructional content.

Key practices observed:

- Use of student-centered and hands-on instructional strategies
- Consistent goal setting, progress monitoring, and student accountability systems

- Differentiated support through small-group instruction and leveled-resources
- Intentional relationship-building and shared ownership in classroom culture and routines

Guiding Questions for Teachers:

- How can I design learning experiences that reflect student interests and promote active engagement?
- What systems do I use to help students monitor their progress and reflect on their learning?
- How often do I modify instruction based on formative assessment data?
- Are my instructional practices aligned with both rigor and support?
- How do I build relationships and establish classroom norms that foster a safe learning environment?
- How do I support students in taking ownership of their learning and growth?

Appendices

Appendix A: Methods (Continued)

Table 4. Focus Group Information.

School	Focus Group	Date	Participants	Format
	Leader Focus Group	February 18, 2025	5	Virtual
	Teacher Focus Group 1	February 18, 2025	3	Virtual
	Teacher Focus Group 2	February 18, 2025	3	Virtual
School C	Teacher Focus Group 3	February 18, 2025	2	Virtual
	Teacher Focus Group 4	February 18, 2025	3	Virtual
	Teacher Focus Group 5	February 18, 2025	3	Virtual
	Teacher Focus Group 6	February 18, 2025	2	Virtual
	Leader Focus Group	February 28, 2025	5	In-person
School B	Teacher Focus Group 1	February 28, 2025	6	In-person
	Teacher Focus Group 2	February 28, 2025	7	In-person
	Leader Focus Group	February 11, 2025	7	Virtual
School A	Teacher Focus Group 1	February 13, 2025	5	Virtual
	Teacher Focus Group 2	February 13, 2025	6	Virtual

Table 5. Documents Reviewed by school.

School	Document Name
School C	Great Start Readiness Pre-School Program Parent Handbook
	2024-2025 K-5 Handbook
	2024-2025 Middle School Handbook
	2024-2025 High School Handbook
	Staff Handbook
	Timelines for Meetings
	Fall Professional Development 2024
School B	Family and Student Handbook
	Employee Handbook
	Master PD Schedule 2024-2025 – Early Release Fridays
	Master PD 2024-2025 – August
	Electronics Policy
	Dress Code Policy
	Semester 2 Audit Exam Plan
	Year-End Teacher Rating and Performance-Based Pay Protocols
School A	Parent and Student Handbook
	Staff Handbook
	Professional Learning Plan 2024-2025

Appendix B: Interview Instruments

Appendix B.1. Teacher Focus Group Questions

Introduction

- Please state your name, position, and how long you've been working at [School Name].

General Opening

- Your school was identified by CMU as a school that outperformed expectations in Reading and Math during the 2023-24 school year, based on your NWEA MAP Growth and M-STEP results. Specifically, your students achieved [tailored description of school-specific results]. To start, what do you attribute these results to? Please try to limit your response to 2-3 factors you think contributed to these results.

Policies and Systems

Next, we want to explore the potential impact your school's policies have on student performance. Policies can be thought of as setting the overall direction and goals for a school by providing the guiding framework that outlines expectations and desired outcomes in terms of curriculum, student behavior, and teaching practices.

- When you think about the results your school and students achieved in the past year, what specific policies has your school instituted that you would attribute this performance to?

    o What has made these policies more impactful than others? Please provide a specific example if possible.

Next, we want to explore the systems within your school that may impact student outcomes. In this context, systems are the structures within which policies are enacted and operationalized. Systems involve the ongoing processes, resources, and organizational structures that enable policies to function effectively in daily operations

- When you think about the policies you previously mentioned, what systems or structures were put in place to enact these policies?

    o What has made these systems or structures more impactful than others? Please provide a specific example if possible.

    o (if needed) How have these systems or structures directly benefited your students? Please provide an example if possible.

- (if needed) How have these systems or structures directly benefited you? Please provide an example if possible.

- Are there other systems or structures in place at [School Name] that are not related to these specific policies, but you would also attribute this performance to?

- Please think about the systems and structures you have described. How would you describe the involvement of your school leadership in the implementation of these systems or structures? Please provide a specific example if possible.

Learning Environment

Next, we would like to discuss the learning environment at [School Name]. The learning environment comprises many factors, including the school's physical space, social dynamics, culture, and teaching methods, among others.

- How do you feel your school's behavior policy influences the learning environment?

- In what ways does the leadership team at your school promote a positive learning environment? Please provide a specific example if possible.

  - What resources does your school provide to promote a positive learning environment? (physical or not physical resources)

- How does your school ensure a safe and respectful professional environment for staff?

  - What systems are in place to ensure staff feel welcome and respected? Please provide a specific example if possible.

- In your classroom, how do you ensure a safe and respectful environment conducive to learning? Please provide a specific example if possible.

  - What systems are in place to ensure both yourself and your students feel respected?

  - What classroom management structures do you find most effective in maintaining a positive classroom environment?

- How do you feel the learning environment in your classroom contributes to student performance?

  - Does this differ at all from the learning environment in your school overall?

Engagement

Next, we will focus on engagement, pertaining to both students and families. Student engagement refers to the level of interest, attention, and motivation that students show while learning, while family engagement involves the collaboration between families and educators to support children's learning and development.

- Please consider all the strategies you implement in your classroom to engage students. Which strategies have been most successful in actively engaging students in their learning? (e.g., peer discussion, hands on activities, debate, games, PBL, etc.)

    o Why would you say this/these strategies have been so impactful? Please provide examples if possible.

    o In what ways have these strategies impacted student learning? Please provide examples if possible.

- Please consider all the strategies you implement to engage families in their child's learning. Which strategies have been most successful in actively engaging families in their child's learning?

    o How has family engagement changed as a result of these strategies? Please provide examples if possible.

    o In what ways has family engagement contributed to student learning? Please provide examples if possible.

- Are there any other strategies you use that have yet to be discussed you think contribute to improved student or family engagement?

Cognitive Challenge

Next, we will focus on the idea of cognitive challenge, or the practice of optimizing the engagement, learning and achievement of students by utilizing learning activities which require students to think critically, analyze information, solve complex problems, and apply knowledge in new situations.

- Please consider all the strategies you implement in your classroom to ensure higher order thinking and application of learning. Which strategies have been most successful? (e.g., posing strategic questions that require analytic reasoning, critical thinking, or problem solving)

    o Why would you say this/these strategies have been so impactful?

- o In what ways have these strategies impacted student learning? Please provide examples if possible.

- Are there any other strategies you use that have yet to be discussed you think contribute to improved outcomes?

Research-Based Strategies

Next, we would like to discuss the utilization of research-based strategies – teaching methods and approaches you use that are supported by evidence from educational research and shown to have a positive impact on student learning.

- Please consider all the research-based instructional strategies you regularly employ in your classroom. Which of these strategies have you found to have the greatest impact on student learning? (e.g., modeling, guided practice, differentiated learning, PBL, interventions or additional support, small groups, etc.)

    - o Why would you say this/these strategies have been so impactful?

    - o In what ways have these research-based strategies impacted student learning? Please provide examples if possible.

Assessment and Adjustment

Next, we would like to discuss how summative (formal) and formative (informal) assessments are used to monitor student understanding and inform adjustments to lesson delivery.

- How does your school use data to inform your continuous improvement efforts?

- How do you utilize summative/formal assessments to monitor student understanding?

    - o How do you use data from summative/formal assessments to adjust lesson delivery methods to ensure student understanding? Please provide examples if possible.

- How do you utilize formative/informal assessments to monitor student understanding?

    - o How do you use data from formative/informal assessments to adjust lesson delivery methods to ensure student understanding? Please provide examples if possible.

- How do the way you utilize summative/formal and formative/informal assessments impact student performance?

Supports and Professional Learning

Now we would like to ask about the support this school offers to educators, whether that be professional learning, coaching, etc.

- Please think about all the topics we have covered so far – learning environment, student and family engagement, cognitive challenge, research-based strategies, assessment and adjustment, and supports and professional learning. What supports, whether it be coaching, professional learning, etc., have you received that has been particularly beneficial?
    - What was so beneficial about this support? Please provide examples if possible.

Final Thoughts

- Is there anything else you think has contributed to student performance in the past year that has not already been discussed?

Appendix B.2. Leader Focus Group Questions

Introduction

- Please state your name, position, and how long you've been working at [School Name].

General Opening

- Your school was identified by CMU as a school that outperformed expectations in Reading and Math during the 2023-24 school year, based on your NWEA MAP Growth and M-STEP results. To start, what do you attribute these results to? Please try to limit your response to 2-3 factors you think contributed to these results.

Policies and Systems

Next, we want to explore the potential impact your school's policies have on student performance. Policies can be thought of as setting the overall direction and goals for a school by providing the guiding framework that outlines expectations and desired outcomes in terms of curriculum, student behavior, and teaching practices.

- When you think about the results your school and students achieved in the past year, what specific policies has your school instituted that you would attribute this performance to?

    - What has made these policies more impactful than others?

Next, we want to explore the systems within your school that may impact student outcomes. In this context, systems are the structures within which policies are enacted and operationalized. Systems involve the ongoing processes, resources, and organizational structures that enable policies to function effectively in daily operations

- When you think about the policies you previously mentioned, what systems or structures were put in place to enact these policies?

    - What has made these systems or structures more impactful than others?

- How would you describe the involvement of your school board in the implementation of these systems or structures?

- (if applicable) How would you describe the involvement of your CMO in the implementation of these systems or structures?

- How would you describe the involvement of the CMU Center for Charter Schools in the implementation of these systems or structures?

Learning Environment

Next, we would like to discuss the learning environment at [School Name]. The learning environment comprises many factors including, the school's physical space, social dynamics, culture, and teaching methods, among others.

- In what ways does the leadership team at your school promote a positive learning environment? Please provide a specific example if possible.

    - What resources does your school provide to promote a positive learning environment? (physical or not physical resources)

- What strategies do you use in the hiring process to identify if potential hire may be a good fit for your school? Please provide a specific example if possible.

- How do you feel the learning environment in your school contributes to staff satisfaction, and ultimately, retention?

    - What strategies, supports, or resources are offered by your school to ensure your best staff are retained?

- How does your school ensure a safe and respectful professional environment for staff?

    - What systems are in place to ensure staff feel welcome and respected? Please provide a specific example if possible.

- What supports does the school provide to help teachers establish positive learning environments in their classrooms?

    o Which of these supports do you feel are most impactful? Please provide a specific example if possible.

- How does your school ensure a safe and respectful learning environment for students? Please provide a specific example if possible.

    o What systems are in place to ensure students feel respected?

- How do you feel your school's behavior policy influences the learning environment?

- How do you feel the learning environment in your school contributes to student performance?

Engagement

Next, we will focus on engagement, pertaining to both students and families. Student engagement refers to the level of interest, attention, and motivation that students show while learning, while family engagement involves the collaboration between families and educators to support children's learning and development.

- Please consider all the strategies your school integrates to actively engage students. Which of these strategies have been the most successful at engaging students?

    o Why would you say this/these strategies have been so impactful? Please provide examples if possible.

    o In what ways have these strategies impacted student learning? Please provide examples if possible.

- Please consider all the strategies your school implements to engage families in their child's learning. Which strategies have been most successful in actively engaging families in their child's learning?

    o How has family engagement changed as a result of these strategies? Please provide examples if possible.

    o In what ways has family engagement contributed to student learning? Please provide examples if possible.

Supports and Professional Learning

Now we would like to ask about the support this school offers, whether that be professional learning, coaching, mental health, counseling, etc., to best serve teachers, students, and families.

- Please think about all the supports your school offers to teachers. Which of these supports do you feel are the most beneficial?

  - What is so beneficial about this/these supports? Please provide examples if possible.

  - Which supports provided to teachers do you think contributes the most to student performance?

- Please think about all the academic supports your school offers to students. Which of these supports do you feel are the most beneficial?

  - What is so beneficial about this/these supports? Please provide examples if possible.

  - Which academic supports provided to students do you think contributes the most to their academic performance?

- Please think about all the non-academic supports your school offers to students. Which of these supports do you feel are the most beneficial?

  - What is so beneficial about this/these supports? Please provide examples if possible.

- Please think about all the supports your school offers to families. Which of these supports do you feel are the most beneficial?

  - What is so beneficial about this/these supports? Please provide examples if possible.

Assessment and Adjustment

Next, we would like to discuss how summative (formal) and formative (informal) assessments are used to monitor student understanding and inform adjustments to lesson delivery.

- How does your school use data to inform your continuous improvement efforts?

- How does your school utilize summative/formal assessments to monitor student understanding?

- How does your school use data from summative/formal assessments to adjust lesson delivery methods to ensure student understanding? Please provide examples if possible.

- How does your school utilize formative/informal assessments to monitor student understanding?

  - How does your school use data from formative/informal assessments to adjust lesson delivery methods to ensure student understanding? Please provide examples if possible.

- How does the way your school utilizes summative/formal and formative/informal assessments impact student performance?

Final Thoughts

- Is there anything else you think has contributed to student performance in the past year that has not already been discussed?

Appendix C. Coding Rubric

Theoretical Codes	Categorical Codes	Descriptive Codes	Definition
Teacher Policies	SPED Documentation	Update SPED Accommodation Bi-Weekly	Teachers are required to update SPED accommodation log bi-weekly.
	Lesson Plans	Weekly Submission	Teachers are required to submit lesson weekly to school leadership team.
	Parent Logs		Teachers record family outreach efforts, behavior documentation, and academic communication at designated intervals.
Student Policies	Cell Phone Policy		Cell phones are not allowed to be used during the school day.
	Extra-Curricular Requirements		GPA requirement for participation in extra-curricular activities.
	Attendance Policy		School-wide policy outlining expectations for student attendance, tardiness, and procedures for absences.
School Policies	Test Administration Policies	Classroom Size	Tests administered in classrooms with a smaller number of students.
		Testing Schedule	Hallways test on same days, quiet, same mindset.
	Classroom Composition	Grade-level Placement	The practice of placing students in grades based on their proficiency levels upon enrollment.
		Small Classroom Sizes	School prioritizes smaller teacher-to-student ratios to support individualized attention and classroom management.
	Teacher Assignment	Looping	Teacher continues teaching the same group of students in consecutive years.
	Behavioral Management Policy	Stated Expectations	Clearly stated expectations for behavior within school and classroom, includes guidelines for removal.
		Tiered Consequences	Policy about certain offenses that would lead to specific repercussions (e.g., calling parents, apologizing, detention, suspension, expulsion)
Behavior Systems	Frameworks	PBIS	A framework used in schools to promote positive behavior. Proactively teaching and reinforcing positive behaviors.
		CHAMPS	A proactive, positive approach to classroom management that focuses on clear communication and defined expectations to improve student behavior and engagement.
		Moral Focus School	Character education program that emphasizes core virtues as part of the school's behavioral expectations and culture.
		Restorative Practice	Integration of restorative practice into the existing structure of the school / existing behavior system.
	Implementation Supports	Support staff	Support staff provide non-academic support and ensure proper behaviors in the building.
		Established Routines	Daily or weekly routines that occur at same time and/or intervals, Clear and consistent rules in classrooms and the school. Structured learning environment promotes students learning, students know what to expect at each phase of the school day

		Student accommodation	Staff provide targeted behavioral or instructional supports, such as scheduled breaks, to students with identified needs.
		Visual Reinforcement	Visibility of procedures, expectations, and norms (Culture Cards, Classroom Contract, Teach Like a Champion).
		Administrative Tracking	Information teachers provide administration (forms) regarding behavior framework implementation (e.g., CHAMPS forms).
Communication Systems	Staff Communication	Frequency of Communication	Leadership provides staff with daily messages or updates to help get everyone on same page, staff are communicating with each other constantly.
		Communication Modality	WhatsApp, text/call, email.
	Family Communication	Communication Modality	Phone call, app (Classroom DOJO), newsletter, email, home visits (for attendance).
		Frequency of Communication	Families receive ongoing communication from school staff, teachers, and admin.
		Accessibility / Culturally Responsive	Parent / family communication is translated or is in a form that is accessible to all families, translation/interpretation utilized, culturally responsive.
	Student Communication	Frequency of Communication	Students receive ongoing communication from teachers and administration, staff willing to repeat messages as needed.
		Communication Modality	Students have multiple platforms they can communicate to teachers.
	School/Community Promotion	Social Media	Promotion of school events, community events on social media platforms.
Educator Support Systems	Peer Collaboration	Grade-Level Meetings	Meetings of groups of teachers and staff by grade level or content areas.
		School-wide Meetings	Meetings of all school staff, teachers, administrators.
		Administration Meetings	Meetings of school leadership and administrators.
		Individual Admin - Teacher Meetings	Meetings between the administration and teachers to analyze classroom- or student-level data.
	Instructional Support	Formal Observations	Formal observations leadership / administrators conduct with teachers.
		Informal Observations	Informal observations leadership / administrators conduct to provide feedback and/or observe something innovative taking place.
		Targeted Observations	Informal observations leadership / administrators conduct to someone who is in need of additional or more extensive support.
		Responsive Observations	Leadership/ administrators lessen the amount of support provided once the teacher has demonstrated progress.
		Peer Observations	Teachers observe one another's classrooms to share strategies, reflect on practice, and foster peer learning.
		Instructional Resources	Teach Like a Champion, assessment aligned resources, etc.
		Curriculum Support	Supports in alignment with the curriculum including resources from coaches and administrators.

		Course Platforms	School uses a specific platform (Google Classroom) to post assignments and course materials.
		Regular Feedback	Leadership / administrators provide regular feedback through observations or walkthrough, format varies.
		Actionable Feedback	Leadership / administrators provide feedback that a teacher can immediately act upon / implement in their classroom.
Academic Support Systems	Academic Rigor	AP Courses	The school offers academically rigorous AP courses to increase cognitive challenge for students.
		Dual Enrollment	The school offers dual enrollment opportunities to increase cognitive challenge for students.
	ELL Support Strategies	Teaching in Both Languages	Bilingual instructional approach used to support English learners' language development and content mastery.
		SIOP Lesson Planning	Research-based framework designed to make content instruction accessible and comprehensible for English Language Learners.
	Tiered Intervention	Leveled Resources	Instructional resources available to students at their level.
		Leveled Curriculum	The curriculum students' are exposed to is written/designed for their level.
		Diagnostic Assessments	MTSS or other screener. Used to assign students in intervention or enrichment courses and supports.
		Enrichment / Lab Classes	Includes content specific lab classes that provide enrichment to students behind in certain content areas (e.g., Math, Reading).
		Tutoring/Summer School	Invite only participation in tutoring or summer school.
		Small-group Instruction	Providing targeted supports to small groups of students that are based on their data and proficiency levels.
Non-Academic Support Systems	Social-emotional learning (SEL) Supports	SEL Platforms/Content	Resources or platforms available to students to support SEL or Mental Health needs. (e.g., Ripple Effect).
		Whole Child Classes	Courses focused on social-emotional development, character education, or life skills to support the holistic development of students.
		Advisory Courses	Dedicated time for students to build relationships with staff, receive guidance, and engage in SEL or academic check-ins.
		Safe Rooms / Open-door Policy	Designates rooms of leadership / administrators where students are safe to discuss sensitive issues without judgement. Open-door policy.
	Non-Instructional Staff	Counselors / Social Workers	Teachers get support from counselors / social worker to communicate with families and support students.
	Career Readiness Resources	Character Development	A focus on whole child development and character traits necessary for lifelong success.
		College Visits/Applications	The school helps arrange visits to college campuses, supports post-secondary applications, and/or support with FAFSA completion.
		Job Opportunities/Exploration	School is able to provide information about job opportunity, internship, career exploration.

Data Infrastructure	Data Sources	Whole Child Data	Data from SEL platforms and non-academic data, includes language acquisition data.
		Stakeholder Surveys	School administers a survey to parents/families to solicit feedback.
		Parent Logs	Includes at risk notes, sharing details and feedback.
		SPED Accommodation Log	Teachers document accommodations provided for students with IEPs.
		Attendance Data	Data regarding student attendance and absences from tracking platforms (e.g., "Concentric").
		Formative Assessments	Use of exit tickets and quizzes to serve as immediate feedback loops to identify learning gaps.
		Summative Assessments	Formal assessments to gauge understanding and proficiency.
	Data Practices	Data Dig Meetings / Group Analysis	Data is used across the different teams that meet (grade level, content, admin, etc.).
		Adjustment to Instruction	Adjusting instruction or reteaching lessons based on findings in the data.
		Student identification	Using data to identify students for targeted academic or nonacademic supports. Includes EOY concerns.
		Strategic Grouping	Diagnostic tests (MTSS, curriculum assessments) and other data are used to inform strategic grouping of students.
		Student Assignment	The leadership team uses student data (whole child, EOY concerns) to inform assignment in classes, supports, etc.
		Dissemination	Data systems (e.g., MTSS diagnostic) inputted in spreadsheet/google sheet and shared with teachers.
		Triangulation	Looking across data to identify themes and patterns.
Hiring and Onboarding Systems	New Staff Support	Instructional Coach Observations	Content specific coaching for new teaching staff, more rigorous than more experienced teachers.
		Leadership Team Observations	Leadership team conducts observations of newly hired teachers to assess progress early upon hiring, focused on behavior and structure.
		Mentor Teachers	Seasoned teachers provide mentorship and support to new teachers.
	Hiring	Expanded Interview Committee	The interview committee includes more than just principal, multiple staff members.
		Sample Lesson	Candidates for teaching position are required to conduct a sample lesson.
		School Transparency	Hiring committee is transparent about the school in terms of results, demographics, etc.
		Assess Community Fit	Hiring committee is deliberate in thinking about whether candidate is a good cultural fit.
School Environment	Student Recognition	Individual Recognition	Student of the month, senior recognition, honor roll, school announcements, emails, and social media.
		Recognition Events	EOY Awards, character achievements, prioritizing growth.

Staff Recognition	Individual Recognition	Teacher of the month, shoutouts for practice/performance achievements, instructional strategies.
	Recognition Events	EOY luncheon to recognize teachers, award events, etc.
Staff-student Congruence	Residence	Teachers and staff reside in community students reside in.
	Racial/Ethnic Background	Teachers and staff share the same race and ethnicity of students.
	Language	Teachers and staff share the same language of students.
Staff Leadership Opportunities	Pilot Testing Curriculum	Teachers trial new instructional materials, programs, or curricula to provide feedback and inform broader adoption decisions.
	Leadership Roles	Opportunities for teachers and staff to take on formal or informal leadership responsibilities, such as leading initiatives, committee participation, etc.
Collective Values	Positive Interactions	Deliberate focus amongst the staff about how they talk to students and each other, consistently framing in positive language. Calm, positive, personable atmosphere.
	Academic Success-Absolute	High Achievement.
	Academic Success-Growth	High Improvement, Grading Systems that prioritize growth, high expectations.
	Student Ownership	Student take lead establishing behavioral frameworks and school culture.
	Whole Child/Well Rounded	The school promotes both academic and non-academic success for students, including emotional wellbeing, extracurricular achievements, and strong character traits.
	Community orientation	Staff, teachers, and leadership well versed in the needs of the community, mutually beneficial relationship between school and community (partnerships).
	Mission Alignment	The staff is aligned in their approach and one mission, consistent messaging and beliefs around the school environment that is conducive for learning.
	Student Relationship	The idea of teachers getting to know students on an individual level, personal interests, care for wellbeing, aspects of humor and trust
	Team Mindset	The value of teachers and staff being on one team and providing collaboration and support. trust.
Admin Dispositions	Visibility	The school leadership is highly visible throughout the school / school day.
	Judgement-free	Leadership / administrators approach staff questions or concerns without judgement.
	Immediacy/Sense of Urgency	Leadership / administrators respond to staff questions or concerns immediately.
	Accessible/Open-door	School leaders / administrators emphasize and practice open-door policy for staff and students.
	Shares in Responsibilities	Leadership willing to assume different roles (e.g., sub teacher) to support staff and students.
	Shared Decision-Making	Teachers help pilot new curriculum, platforms, or instructional materials to help provide guidance for leadership decisions. Valuing educator voices.
	Follow-Through	Administrators follow through with policy / implements it fully.

		Encourage Risk	Encourage innovative educational strategies from staff .
		Differentiated Support for Staff	Teachers with less experience teaching and at the school require a different level of support, admin is key to onboarding and training.
Family Engagement	Engagement Practices	Positive Academic Calls	Teachers, staff, or admin call parents/families to share positive news/progress of child.
		Behavior / Attendance Calls	Calls home regarding student's behavior and/or attendance concerns.
		Comparison Schools	Sharing about school performance compared to neighboring schools.
		Student Performance	Transparent, open, and frequent communication with parents regarding their student's academic and non-academic data.
		Connection to Outside Resources	The school connects families to outside academic and nonacademic resources for students and other family members.
		Family Projects	Take home project that the student can work on with their family.
		Timely Topics	What is discussed with parents or events are hosted about are of immediate relevance to student needs (e.g., FAFSA, cleanliness, SEL).
	Engagement Opportunities	Academic Events	Schools host events like math and science nights where parents can see their children's learning in action.
		Non-Academic Events	School hosts events that celebrate the culture of predominant student groups.
		Tea with Principal	Principal hosts regularly schedule teacher with principal (or some other event) that parents/families are invited to.
		Opportunities to Serve	Volunteer opportunities at school events, chaperoning field trips, PTO, etc.
		Adult Education	Opportunities for adult education for parents and family members of students.
		Conferences	Family conferences. This includes invitations for parents to participate in conferences.
	Family Feedback	Surveys	The school seeks family input through feedback surveys.
		Input on Decisions	The school actively seeks family input on decisions from inception through execution.
Student Engagement	Leadership Opportunities	Student Body Council	Student participation in student body council.
		Athletics	Student participation in athletics.
		Culture Promotion	Students plan events and activities regarding school culture and spirit.
		Social Clubs	Student participation in clubs that do not have an academic/competition focus.
		Student Mentors	Students serving as mentors to other students.
		Academic Clubs	Student participation in academic clubs and competitions.
		External Presentations	Opportunities for students to present their learning, projects, or achievements to audiences such as the school board.

	Relationship Building Strategies	Engaging in Interests	Teachers and staff build relationships with students by learning about and incorporating their personal interests, hobbies, or experiences into conversations and classroom activities.
		Addressing Non-Academic Needs	Addressing social-emotional and physical needs (food, clothing, etc.) of students.
		Cultural Competency	Staff demonstrate awareness, respect, and responsiveness to students' cultural backgrounds.
	Student Accountability	Display Progress	Student progress is visually displayed and discussed in meeting with students and teachers/staff.
		Individual Tracking	Students responsible for tracking their individual grades and progress, and determining next steps.
		Student-led Parent Conferences	Students take the lead in presenting their academic progress, strengths, areas for growth, and goals to their families.
		Teacher Conferencing	Having grade meetings with students, making sure they're aware of their status, progress, missing work. Ensuring they are aware and accountable, especially for at risk.
Instructional Practices	Engagement	Hands-on Activities	Teachers utilize hands-on and physically active learning activities to engage students.
		Real-world examples	Teachers bring in real-world examples into lessons or coursework to increase student interest and engagement such as videos, images, scenarios.
		Student Choice	Student choice in learning and demonstrating knowledge.
		Project-based learning	Teachers engage students in project-based learning to increase cognitive challenge for students.
		Group Work	Teachers utilize group work to engage students through social learning and collaborative problem solving.
	Cognitive Challenge	Student-Led Instruction	Having students lead the class in a lesson or help the teacher with a specific task.
		Spiraling Standards	Bring in standards from future grade levels but broken down for specific grade level (mostly in elementary).
		Critical Questioning	Prompting students with open ended questions for sense-making and higher level understanding or application of a topic.
		Cross-subject connections	Teachers make cross-subject connections in lessons or coursework to increase cognitive challenge for students.
	Differentiation	Leveled Practice	The work assigned to students is at their designated level or differentiated to their individual needs.
		Leveled Instruction	Teachers' instructional practice is aligned to the level of the student.
		Modeling and Guided Practice	Teachers utilize practices such as "I do, we do, you do" to demonstrate a concept before having students practice on their own
Professional Learning	PL Structure	Dedicated Time	Schools allocate specified times for teachers to participate in PD.
		Job Embedded	Professional development integrated into the school day or aligned directly to teachers' current instructional context.

		Collective Participation	Teachers from the same content area or grade level participate in PD together.
		1-1 Format	PD personnel analyze data with teacher and strategize ways to address gaps by analyzing data, co-plan, or co-teach.
		Group Format	The PD format is a larger workshop or training with teachers and staff regarding a specific grade level or content area.
	PL Content	Behavior Management	PD content is focused on behavior management.
		Differentiation	PD content is focused on differentiation.
		ELL Support	PD content is focused on English Language Learners.
		Career Phase	PD content is focused on career phase.
		Subject-specific	PD content is focused on a specific subject or content area.
		Social-Emotional Needs	PD content is focused on students' social-emotional needs.
	PL Facilitator	Instructional Coaches	Instructional coaches provide the PD, in the form of coaching, workshops, or trainings.
		Administrators	School leaders/administrators provide the PD, in the form of coaching, workshops, or trainings.
		CMO/Central Office Experts	Internal CMO personnel provide PD in the form of coaching, workshops, or trainings.
		External Experts	External non-CMO personnel provide the PD, in the form of coaching, workshops, or trainings.

About This Report

This research was conducted by Basis Policy Research. Basis conducts applied public policy research, primarily in the field of education; provides technical assistance to state departments of education, districts, and schools; and supports policymakers by providing the data they need to make sound decisions. For more information visit our website at www.basispolicyresearch.com.