

THE DREAM LAB

WHERE BIG IDEAS BECOME BOLD SOLUTIONS FOR MICHIGAN'S FUTURE



**DREAMING ISN'T A LUXURY -
IT'S HOW TOMORROW'S
EDUCATION GETS BUILT TODAY.**



TO THE DREAMERS



Dan Quisenberry
MAPSA President

Dan Quisenberry has served as President of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies (MAPSA) for over two decades, leading bipartisan advocacy efforts, elevating Michigan as a national voice in the charter school movement, and championing innovation and equity to ensure every student has access to a high-quality public education.

These are not abstract ideas. They are actionable strategies that charter schools are uniquely positioned to lead.

For more than 30 years, Michigan's charter schools have stood as proof that bold ideas can change the trajectory of education. We were founded on a promise: to innovate, to challenge the status quo, and to deliver better outcomes for students who had been left behind. That promise is as urgent today as it was at our beginning.

The research you hold in your hands makes one thing clear: we cannot afford to settle for incremental change. Through our partnership with Lumen Impact Group and the collective voices of educators, parents, authorizers, and community leaders, we've identified the levers that can truly transform education in Michigan.

Now is the time for us, as leaders, to act with the courage that launched this movement. We must lean into our flexibility, test new models, and prove again that innovation in education is not only possible, it is essential. The next phase of this work will demand pilots, investment, and a willingness to think differently. If we commit ourselves fully, Michigan's charter schools can once again lead the nation in fulfilling the original promise of public education: equity, excellence, and opportunity for every child.

Dan Quisenberry

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Dan Quisenberry'.

MAPSA President



DARE TO DREAM

RECLAIM THE DREAM

Michigan's educators are under siege from compliance mandates to workforce shortages to the daily triage of post-pandemic recovery. There's little space left for what once fueled our sector: imagination, creativity, and transformation.

MAPSA created the Dream Lab to change that. We're building the space, and the permission for public school educators to dream again, because dreaming isn't a luxury - it's how tomorrow's education gets built today.

FROM DREAMING TO DOING

This isn't a theory lab. It's an action lab. The Dream Lab is a statewide innovation engine, fueled by educators and school leaders, where ideas are piloted, pressure-tested, and scaled.

DESIGNED BY LEADERS FOR LEADERS

The Lab is not driven by think tanks or publishers. It is built by educators, for educators, those who are closest to the students and the systems. We don't just respond to policy, we help shape it with real-world insights from classrooms across Michigan.

OUR GOALS

STEP OUTSIDE YOUR COMFORT ZONE

School leaders and educators drive the innovation in this space, not policymakers. We amplify practitioner voices to create student-centered futures to bring real change to our K12 system.

- Developing a unified vision for education in Michigan.
- Defining how charter schools can influence change beyond their own sector.
- Outlining collaborative efforts and accountability measures.
- Identifying funding resources to advance this work.
- Ensuring all students have access to high-quality educational options.

IT'S TIME FOR BOLD ACTION

Charter school leaders and decision-makers must prioritize the greater vision over short-term obstacles.

BACKGROUND & METHODOLOGY

MAPSA has taken on a project to boldly reimagine Michigan's education sector in which charters play a leading and vital role in a reshaped education landscape. To do this, MAPSA partnered with Lumen Impact Group to leverage existing work, collect new data, and marshal an Ecosystem Collective made up of a diverse cross-section of the charter sector and allies to develop a set of key levers to disrupt the status quo and improve outcomes for all students.

MAPSA and Lumen Impact Group began the research with a discovery process designed to capture both data and lived perspectives across Michigan's education sector. This phase combined the analysis of existing reports with focus groups and interviews involving authorizers, school leaders, ESP executives, parents, business leaders, and foundation representatives. Together, these inputs painted a picture of the current state of education in Michigan and revealed emerging opportunities and challenges related to growth, quality, and resources.

Building on this foundation, MAPSA and Lumen convened the Ecosystem Collective, a diverse group of charter leaders and allies tasked with co-creating a vision for systemic change. In its first meeting, the Collective reviewed the discovery findings alongside statewide initiatives like Launch Michigan and Grow Michigan Together. Through this collaborative process, the group identified gaps where strategies were missing and clarified how charters could lead. The key levers for transformation emerged:

- Personalized Learning
- Diverse Learning Pathways
- Reimagined Role for Teachers

To further test and refine these levers, MAPSA and Lumen engaged additional stakeholders through focus groups with Professional Innovators in Education coaches and Michigan parents, interviews with researchers and practitioners, and a survey of educators in MAPSA's certification program. National context was added through a January 2025 National Parents Union (NPU) poll, which reinforced local findings. This blend of qualitative and quantitative methods created a robust evidence base that will now guide the next phase of research: analyzing best-practice models from across the country and identifying conditions necessary for successful implementation in Michigan.

PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Personalized learning is reshaping the way education is delivered across the country by tailoring instruction to individual student needs. Rather than adhering to a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach, personalized learning enables students to progress at their own pace, demonstrate mastery in various ways, and engage deeply with content that reflects their interests and strengths. Teachers play a crucial role in facilitating this process, shifting from traditional content delivery to guiding students through meaningful, student-centered learning experiences. However, while this model has gained traction in select schools, expanding it requires systemic shifts in policy, school structures, and instructional practices.

The National Parents Union (NPU) report confirms that parents strongly support personalized learning models that give students greater control over their education. According to their nationwide survey, **86% of parents want schools to provide clear data on student achievement and learning progress**—a crucial component of personalized learning. Parents believe that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work, and many support competency-based progressions that allow students to advance when they demonstrate mastery, rather than being tied to traditional grade levels or pacing. The report also highlights that **83% of parents favor expanding virtual public-school options**, particularly in rural areas where educational choices are limited.

STUDENT OWNERSHIP OF LEARNING

Many educators emphasized that true personalized learning requires students to take ownership of their educational journey, yet systemic barriers often make this difficult. According to the Professional Innovators in Education teacher survey, **62% of teachers expressed that standardized testing and mandated pacing prevent them from adapting instruction to individual student needs**. One teacher noted, “We are so focused on pacing guides and standardized tests that students don’t get a chance to explore their strengths. Personalized learning would change that, but we need leadership to support it.”

Similarly, parents expressed concerns that traditional assessments fail to capture their children’s true abilities and learning styles. Many support alternative measures of mastery, such as projects, portfolios, and real-world applications, to allow students to demonstrate understanding in ways that are more meaningful and reflective of their skills. One parent shared, “If my child learns best by working on projects, why should they be forced to take a test to prove their knowledge? Schools should allow more ways for students to demonstrate mastery.”

Additionally, educators noted that students who take control of their own learning tend to be more engaged and motivated, but schools need to be more intentional in designing learning environments that support this. When teachers have the freedom to facilitate rather than dictate learning, students gain confidence in their ability to learn independently. However, **only 28% of teachers in the survey reported that they have the flexibility to truly implement student-driven learning in their current classroom structure**.

PERSONALIZED LEARNING

FLEXIBILITY IN SCHEDULING AND STRUCTURE

Expanding scheduling flexibility is emerging as a key factor in making personalized learning feasible. A growing number of charter schools have begun implementing hybrid models that allow students to split their time between in-person instruction and independent learning, but these approaches remain limited due to policy constraints. Seat-time requirements and state-mandated instructional hours often force schools to adhere to rigid structures that do not align with student-centered approaches.

In addition to student schedules, teacher flexibility is also a concern. According to the Professional Innovators in Education teacher survey, **25% of teachers indicated that having more flexibility in choosing the subjects or grade levels they teach would greatly improve their job satisfaction.** One teacher shared, “We talk about personalized learning for students, but we don’t have it for teachers. Flexibility in scheduling needs to work both ways.” Several other stakeholders emphasized that rigid class structures not only limit teachers but also prevent students from engaging deeply in learning.

Schools that have experimented with more flexible scheduling models, including longer project periods, block scheduling, and hybrid structures, report that these approaches help students engage more deeply with learning. However, without state-level policy adjustments, many schools feel their ability to implement these changes remains limited. A school leader noted, “We have the knowledge and tools to make learning more flexible, but state policies don’t always support the innovation that schools want to pursue.”

BARRIERS TO PERSONALIZED LEARNING

The push for personalized learning also highlights ongoing challenges with teacher workload and training. Many educators feel they lack the time and support needed to effectively implement personalized approaches. According to the Professional Innovators in Education teacher survey, **30% of teachers identified more planning and collaboration time as a top priority for reducing burnout.** Without these identified or yet unknown supports, many educators struggle to integrate personalized learning strategies while also meeting traditional instructional demands. A teacher coach noted, “The best schools are those that make teachers feel supported. When they have time to plan and collaborate, they can actually make personalized learning work.”

Another significant barrier is the rigidity of curriculum requirements. A Professional Innovators survey respondent shared: “Even when I want to personalize instruction, I have to stick to the district-mandated scope and sequence. If we had more flexibility in the curriculum, we could do so much more for students.” A focus group participant echoed this, stating, “We need to stop treating all students the same. Some students need more time, and some can move faster. Personalized learning should be about what works for each child, not what works for the system.”

DIVERSE LEARNING PATHWAYS

Diverse learning pathways are essential for ensuring that every student has access to an education that aligns with their strengths, interests, and future aspirations. While traditional education models emphasize a singular path to college, students benefit from having a range of options, including apprenticeships, industry partnerships, career and technical education (CTE), and alternative credentialing. Many educators and policymakers agree that broadening the definition of success beyond a four-year degree is critical to preparing students for the demands of the modern workforce. However, despite growing interest in alternative pathways, structural barriers continue to limit their availability in many Michigan schools.

The NPU report confirms strong parental support for expanding pathways beyond traditional four-year college models. According to the national survey, **94% of parents support career, technical, and trade skills programs in high schools**. Similarly, **93% favor dual-credit classes that allow students to earn college credits while still in high school**. These findings reinforce the importance of expanding hands-on, career-connected learning opportunities for Michigan students. Parents recognize that the workforce is evolving, and they want schools to equip students with relevant, real-world skills that prepare them for multiple post-secondary options, not just college.

PATHWAYS BEYOND COLLEGE: THE NEED FOR EARLY EXPOSURE

One of the strongest findings from this research is that students need earlier exposure to career and learning pathway options. Many stakeholders emphasized that middle school is a critical yet underutilized time for introducing students to potential career paths. “Middle school is a lost time period; students need to start exploring their interests much earlier,” one education leader shared. Survey data supports this concern, with teachers and parents expressing that students often lack awareness of the full range of opportunities available to them. Expanding access to career exploration programs, industry partnerships, and mentorship opportunities earlier in the K-12 experience could help students make more informed decisions about their future.

A Professional Innovators survey respondent noted that too many students graduate high school without a clear direction for their next steps, saying, “So many students graduate high school with no real sense of what’s next. We should be exposing them to different fields and industries much earlier.” Many educators agree that career exploration should begin well before high school, ensuring that students have a chance to explore diverse fields and industries before they are required to make major post-secondary decisions. Parents also raised concerns about limited career-connected learning opportunities, emphasizing that students should be introduced to potential career paths long before their junior or senior year. One parent expressed frustration with the current system, stating, “We should not wait until junior year of high school to talk about careers —students need to see what’s possible long before then.”

DIVERSE LEARNING PATHWAYS

EXPANDING CAREER-CONNECTED LEARNING AND APPRENTICESHIPS

Career-connected learning is a promising approach that integrates real-world experiences into the classroom, helping students gain practical knowledge and skills while still in school. Some charter schools have successfully developed internship and apprenticeship programs, allowing students to earn academic credit while gaining hands-on experience. However, these opportunities remain difficult to scale due to administrative barriers and rigid scheduling structures. Many teachers feel constrained by seat-time requirements and traditional academic schedules, which limit flexibility in how these experiences can be incorporated.

The Professional Innovators survey highlighted that teachers overwhelmingly support expanding real-world learning opportunities, yet many struggle to integrate these experiences within the current structure of the school day. One teacher explained, "We talk about career pathways, but in reality, the structure of the school day makes it difficult to implement real-world learning experiences." Another teacher from a charter school emphasized, "Our students thrive when they can connect their learning to the real world. We've seen great success in internship programs, but we need more flexibility in how we integrate these experiences into the school day."

The NPU report reinforces this, with **83% of parents supporting virtual public school options and stronger industry partnerships to ensure students gain real-world experience before graduation.** Many parents believe that closer collaboration between schools and businesses is essential for preparing students for success beyond high school. One parent stated, "Schools need to work more closely with local businesses and industries so that students see firsthand how their education connects to their future careers."

BARRIERS TO EXPANDING LEARNING PATHWAYS

Despite growing support for diverse learning pathways, many schools struggle to implement these opportunities due to policy constraints and outdated accountability measures. Some of the biggest barriers identified by teachers and administrators include:

- Rigid graduation requirements that do not prioritize hands-on learning experiences
- Limited funding for career and technical education (CTE) programs
- Lack of industry partnerships and internship opportunities
- Administrative resistance to non-traditional learning structures

A Professional Innovators survey respondent highlighted the difficulty of expanding career and apprenticeship programs, explaining, "There are so many students who would benefit from an apprenticeship or industry certification, but the way our schools are structured makes it incredibly difficult to build these options at scale." Funding challenges also remain a significant hurdle, with a charter school leader noting, "We want to expand technical and career pathways, but the funding formulas don't support it. If these programs were prioritized like traditional academic subjects, we could reach more students."

Additionally, teachers pointed out that many schools lack the partnerships needed to offer meaningful career-connected experiences. One educator shared, "Right now, we operate under a system designed for the past, not the future. If we want students to be prepared for life after high school, we need to rethink how we structure learning."

REIMAGINING THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Transforming the role of teachers is central to ensuring sustainable, high-quality education in Michigan. Rather than being confined to traditional instructional roles, educators must be positioned as mentors, innovators, and facilitators of student-centered learning. Many stakeholders emphasized that improving teacher retention, satisfaction, and effectiveness depends on shifting school cultures, rethinking professional development, and expanding opportunities for leadership within the teaching profession. Addressing these issues is crucial, particularly as schools grapple with ongoing teacher shortages and burnout.

TEACHER WELL-BEING AND RETENTION

One of the clearest findings from this research is that teacher well-being is directly linked to retention. According to the Professional Innovators survey, **while 39% of teachers reported that they love teaching, only 17% feel confident about their long-term sustainability in the profession.** When asked about the most impactful ways to reduce burnout, **76% of teachers prioritized increased salaries and financial incentives, while 30% cited more planning and collaboration time.** These findings suggest that while financial compensation is critical, structural changes to workload, autonomy, and school culture are equally important in ensuring teachers stay in the profession.

Burnout is often misunderstood as purely a workload issue, but many teachers emphasized that it is also about a lack of support, autonomy, and professional agency. A Professional Innovators survey respondent explained, “The workload itself is not what drives people away—it’s the lack of control over our work, the lack of input on decisions, and the feeling that we are constantly reacting instead of planning.” Another teacher reinforced this, stating, “Burnout isn’t just about exhaustion—it’s about feeling undervalued. If schools don’t invest in teacher well-being, they won’t retain good educators.” This highlights the need for an intentional focus not just on reducing hours, but also on empowering teachers as professionals.

COLLABORATION AND SCHOOL CULTURE

Collaboration and school culture emerged as key factors influencing teacher satisfaction and retention. Many teachers expressed frustration with limited planning time, excessive administrative burdens, and a lack of meaningful professional development opportunities. The Professional Innovators survey revealed that **54% of teachers believe that improved communication and transparency would strengthen school culture, while 40% emphasized the need for stronger collaboration and teamwork.**

One teacher shared, “Collaboration time should be structured and meaningful. If leadership doesn’t prioritize it, teachers will always feel isolated and unsupported.” Another noted, “When schools build real teams, teachers stay. When we feel like we’re all working in silos, people leave.” Schools that prioritize well-designed collaboration structures—such as dedicated planning time, peer mentoring, and interdisciplinary teaching teams—tend to see higher levels of teacher engagement and retention.

A teacher leader in a focus group reflected on a positive example of school culture, stating, “I’ve worked in schools where the leadership valued collaboration, and it changed everything. When teachers feel they have a voice and are supported, they give more to their students and to each other.” However, in contrast, another teacher shared, “In my school, collaboration is just a buzzword. We’re expected to work together, but we’re not given any real time or structure to do it effectively.” These differing experiences highlight the importance of intentional leadership strategies that prioritize collaboration in meaningful ways rather than treating it as an afterthought.

REIMAGINING THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN TEACHER PREPARATION AND REAL-WORLD TEACHING

Another significant challenge is the gap between teacher preparation programs and the realities of modern classrooms. Many educators feel their training focused too heavily on content delivery rather than on the practical skills needed to be effective in the classroom. Current leadership pathways also fail to adequately prepare school leaders for the demands of fostering a strong organizational culture.

One survey respondent pointed out, “We spend so much time in college learning about content standards, but no one teaches us how to actually manage a classroom...or how to handle the emotional demands of teaching.” Another educator added, “New teachers are expected to just figure it out, and that’s why so many leave the profession in their first few years.” The disconnect between teacher preparation and on-the-ground classroom experience remains a significant challenge that contributes to high turnover rates.

Additionally, many teachers feel unprepared for leadership roles when they transition into administration. One education professional emphasized the importance of investing in the coaching and training of teachers, teaching them how to collaborate effectively, give and receive feedback, manage relationships with parents, and advocate for themselves within school systems. A policy expert reinforced this idea, stating, “We assume school leaders know how to build culture, but most have little practical training. If we don’t invest in this, nothing else will work.”

RETHINKING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Many teachers emphasized the need for more targeted, relevant professional development that directly supports their growth as educators and leaders. The Professional Innovators teacher survey found that **47% of teachers believe that creating structured pathways for career growth would improve teacher retention.** However, many teachers feel that current PD opportunities fail to provide real value. One teacher noted, “So much PD is just checking a box. We sit through hours of training that doesn’t actually help us in the classroom.”

Instead, educators expressed a strong desire for PD that is interactive, collaborative, and directly applicable to their teaching. One teacher shared, “The best PD I’ve ever had was when I got to collaborate with other teachers and learn from their experiences. We need more of that.” Another emphasized that learning from peers rather than sitting through one-size-fits-all training sessions has been the most impactful in their growth as an educator.

Beyond professional development, expanding leadership pathways for teachers is a critical factor in retaining top talent. Many educators do not want to become administrators but are looking for ways to take on leadership roles without leaving the classroom. One teacher shared, “If there were more ways to grow within the profession without leaving the classroom, we wouldn’t lose so many good teachers.” Another respondent added, “Some of us don’t want to be principals, but we do want leadership opportunities. Schools need to figure out how to create those roles.”

CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

The findings from this discovery process offer a rich and nuanced understanding of the conditions necessary to activate MAPSA's key levers of impact in Michigan. Stakeholders consistently voiced a desire for an education system that is more personalized, inclusive of diverse learning pathways, supportive of teacher leadership, and grounded in accountability systems that reflect student-centered outcomes. However, translating this vision into reality will require significant shifts in policy, school structures, funding mechanisms, and professional development models. Barriers such as rigid scheduling, limited curriculum flexibility, inadequate support for teachers, and outdated accountability frameworks must be addressed to create the enabling conditions for innovation and equity.

Moving forward, MAPSA and its partners are well-positioned to lead this work by continuing to engage diverse stakeholders, surface promising models from across the country, and pilot context-specific solutions within Michigan. The next phase of research will focus on identifying successful implementation strategies and scalable practices, drawing on both national exemplars and local innovations. At the same time, MAPSA and Lumen Impact Group will further explore an additional lever—Accountability Aligned with High-End Customization—to better understand how performance measures can evolve to support more personalized and meaningful learning outcomes.

To bring this vision to life, MAPSA will actively pursue funding opportunities that enable deeper exploration of the four levers and support pilot programs across Michigan schools. By securing the resources necessary to test, refine, and scale these strategies, MAPSA and its partners can ensure that promising ideas move from research into practice. This commitment to both innovation and implementation will position Michigan's charter sector as a national leader in reimagining education and advancing equitable outcomes for all students.

The path forward requires us, not someday, but now, to test new models, pilot bold ideas, and lead with courage. MAPSA invites schools, educators, and partners to join the Dream Lab in turning these four levers into living examples across Michigan classrooms. With the right investment and your leadership, we can transform this research into practice and prove again that Michigan's charter schools are not just schools of choice, but schools of change.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR SCHOOLS

The Dream Lab is not just a research project; it is a call to action for schools across Michigan. Each of the key levers identified through this work represents an opportunity for charter schools to lead with boldness and creativity. For school leaders, this means looking at your own classrooms, teams, and communities and asking: Where can we pilot change? Where can we push beyond compliance and test new approaches that better serve students?

Schools can engage in this work in practical ways: by partnering with MAPSA to launch pilots in personalized learning or diverse pathways, by contributing teacher and student voices to ongoing research, and by joining collaborative networks to share what is working in your context. Even small shifts, such as rethinking scheduling, expanding career exploration earlier, or giving teachers more agency, can contribute to the broader momentum.

Most importantly, this work reaffirms that charter schools were created to innovate. The Dream Lab is here to support schools in reclaiming that role, offering the resources, partnerships, and advocacy needed to transform bold ideas into real solutions. Together, we can ensure Michigan's charter schools not only meet today's challenges but set the pace for the future of public education.