A photograph of a male teacher in an orange baseball jersey standing and talking to a group of students seated at a long table in a classroom. The students are looking at papers and listening. The room has white brick walls and yellow chairs.

REVOLUTIONARY COLLABORATION

TRANSFORMING TEACHER ROLES TO DRIVE REGIONAL OUTCOMES

CASE STUDY

Reimagining Teacher Leadership

Washtenaw Educational Options Consortium

**Washtenaw Intermediate School District &
Washtenaw County Schools**

This Case study was developed with special insights from the staff at the Washtenaw Educational Options Consortium.



This case study was co-produced as a special collaboration between Empower Schools and Teacher Powered Schools.

Teacher-Powered Schools (TPS) is a project of the nonprofit organization Education Evolving. We believe school educators, those working closest to students, should co-design and make decisions impacting student success. Teacher-powered schools use shared leadership models to reimagine educator roles and create rigorous, relevant, student-centered learning environments. Our TPS team works directly with school and district teams through workshops, expert resources, and school partnerships facilitated by our TPS coaches who have been leaders at their own teacher-powered schools. We coach teams on shifting mindsets, establishing technical skills, and using proven practices to build the capacity of all teachers to be leaders without leaving the classroom. This model improves outcomes for students and educators. We engage districts, authorizers, unions, teacher prep providers, and policymakers to sustain K-12 systems where educators and students thrive. For more information, visit teacherpowered.org

Empower Schools is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization operating throughout the United States. Empower works with state agencies, policymakers, public school districts, institutions of higher education, and in partnership with communities across the United States in service of millions of students. Empower improves outcomes for urban and rural communities by developing sustainable systemic solutions at the school, district, and state levels.

Empower was founded in 2013 on the belief that partnering with communities to empower educators would lead to greater student success at school and in life. We support community partners in designing, launching, and sustaining innovative schools and school systems that help students achieve long term economic mobility. Empower works at the systems level to propose, develop, and transform state legislation and public policy, build community support, nurture systems-level leaders, and provide equitable K-12 and post-secondary opportunities for all students.

Empower's responsive approach is flexible and focused on the unique context and needs of each school community.

For more information, visit empowerschools.org.

© 2025. All rights reserved.

ATTN: Empower Schools
265 Franklin Street , STE 1702
Boston, MA 02110

Ways to Use this Case Study

Like a Short Story

Read all sections in order and consider the narrative of the teachers and community.

Like a Resource Bank

Bookmark this study to reference the interactive resources found throughout.

Like a Launchpad

Use the learnings found in this study to support your Professional Learning Community (PLC) and develop a plan for your school's reimagining.

More to Learn

Go beyond reading to apply study takeaways to your learning community.



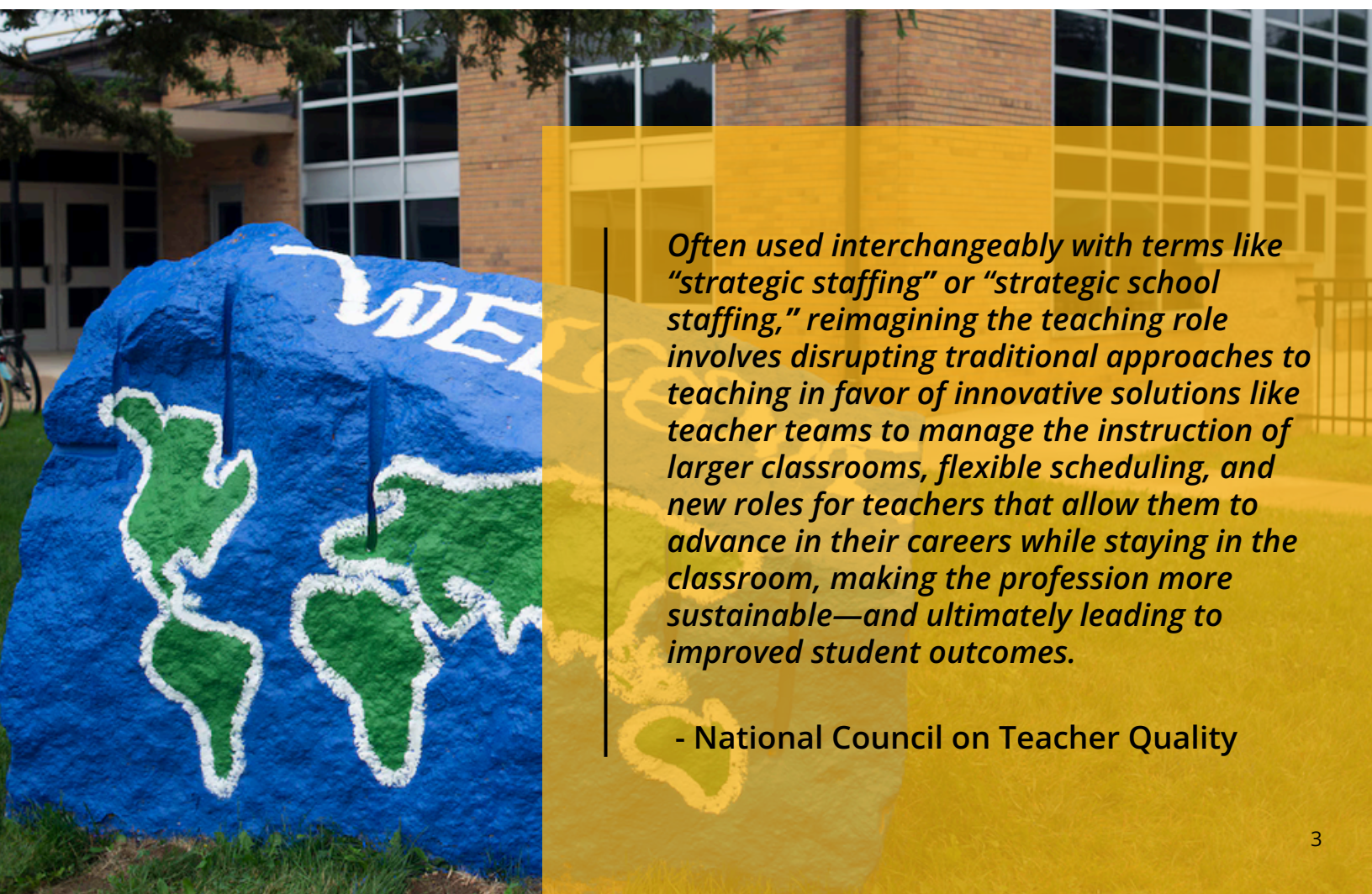
Bright Ideas

Tips and interactive resources you can click to dive deeper



Get In Touch

To get support implementing reimagining, reach out to us at empowerschools.org/contact



Often used interchangeably with terms like “strategic staffing” or “strategic school staffing,” reimagining the teaching role involves disrupting traditional approaches to teaching in favor of innovative solutions like teacher teams to manage the instruction of larger classrooms, flexible scheduling, and new roles for teachers that allow them to advance in their careers while staying in the classroom, making the profession more sustainable—and ultimately leading to improved student outcomes.

- National Council on Teacher Quality

CASE STUDY SUMMARY

Reimagining in Practice



Hybrid positions that combine teaching, advising, and leadership to produce a work experience that is more varied and rewarding

- Advisory models that prioritize one-on-one student-teacher relationships and individualized student pathways
- Regular re-examination of schedules, roles, and practices to better meet student needs

Reimagining in Policy

- Partnership agreement between 9 Washtenaw County school districts and the Washtenaw Educational Options Consortium (WEOC) that affords consortium schools site-level autonomy and access to services (e.g., payroll, finance) from a district fiscal agent
- A union agreement between WEOC and the WEOC Federation of Teachers that explicitly elevates teacher-powered practices, offers extra pay for extra work, and delineates the duties and authority of a Program Quality Committee of elected teachers, staff, and administrators



Evidence of Impact

Opening Doors for All County Public School Students

Exemplary Working Culture



WEOC has been rated a Top Workplace in Michigan, with high staff engagement and retention.

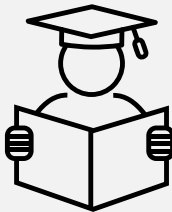
WEOC's model is efficient, operating at only 95% of the per-pupil dollars allocated to traditional Michigan districts.

Accelerating Post-Secondary Outcomes

Students who would have otherwise dropped out are graduating high school at Washtenaw Alliance for Virtual Education.

100% of Washtenaw International High School seniors graduate and get accepted into college.

Early College Alliance at Eastern Michigan University students earn up to 65 free college credits while still in high school.




HOW TO REIMAGINE


The Teacher Role


How Innovation Unlocks Teacher Power


District public schools can be Innovation Schools – places where teachers, students, and community stakeholders are sustainably empowered to create the best school for the local community while preparing students to thrive academically, personally, and in their future careers.

To enable Reimagining in Practice that offer teachers fulfilling careers in schools that are great places for both students and educators, education leaders should work to ensure:

- **Space for Innovation**

Broad flexibility to enact change is key, and this flexibility should be clearly defined and allow for continuous improvement
- **Aligned Policy and Resources**


Districts, state education agencies, and other stakeholders create space for innovation and enable flexibility in how teachers work together , interact with students, and act as leaders
- **Sustainability for Successful Efforts**

School districts and other stakeholders should ensure that successful remaginings can continue as long as they are meeting ambitious goals
- **Shared Accountability**

Innovative reimagining of the role of the teacher is a powerful tool but must work in service of improved outcomes


Types of Innovation Schools


Learning communities can decide to take on innovation for a variety of reasons. Those reasons shape the type of reimaginings that would be most critical and effective.


**Enabling Conditions**

States, education agencies, and school boards have varying policies that enable reimagining throughout the country.

[Read more about enabling conditions and protections that exists here.](#)

- **Turnaround Schools**

Designed to dramatically improve performance.
- **Pathways Schools**

Designed to give students unique exploration and training opportunities in specialized fields.
- **Innovative Model Schools**

Designed to implement a coherent school model, whether time-tested (e.g., dual language, Montessori, IB) or newly designed
- **Community Schools**

Designed to act as a hub and meet holistic student and family needs.



FROM IDEAS TO ACTION

**What would make this class more relevant and engaging?
How can we make more time for student check-ins?
What should our staff meeting agenda look like?**

Asking tough questions, trialing solutions, and retooling the student experience is a big part of the job for teachers in the Washtenaw Educational Options Consortium (WEOC), headquartered in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

In consortium schools, staff involvement in school policy and practice decisions is the norm. “You’re expected to have ideas,” says Sean Fountain, an English Language Arts teacher and advisor at Washtenaw Alliance for Virtual Education (WAVE), a WEOC middle and high school providing flexible, student-centered learning both virtually and in-person. Some examples:

- When no reliable system existed to share student support needs, a WAVE math teacher proposed a daily 5-minute morning staff meeting.
- When 12 committees for 33 staff members became unmanageable, a teacher suggested consolidating them, and now three—Learning, Operations, and Climate & Culture—handle most problem-solving.

The impact for students? Teachers who really know what they need and have the ability (and bandwidth) to support them.

Just a mile to the northwest is Eastern Michigan University, where Early College Alliance (ECA) students can earn up to 65 college credits—for free—before graduating high school. Here, too, teachers have a long tradition of empowerment. Teachers not only enjoy professional autonomy in the classroom, but they also participate in collaborative decision-making at a school level—leading to responsive, rapid-cycle improvement.

**"I HAVE FAITH THIS
STAFF WILL PIVOT
IF WE HAVE TO."**

**- SEAN FOUNTAIN,
WAVE TEACHER/ADVISOR**

“It’s like teaching evolution,” shared Wendy Benya, a biology teacher and dean of students at ECA. “It’s not like we want the school to evolve into the perfect organism, but the organism that’s needed for the current moment.”

Down the road at Washtenaw International High School (WIHI)—and its newer, colocated middle school, Washtenaw International Middle Academy (WIMA)—teachers have developed a similar culture of shared leadership, albeit in a more traditional school building. Decision-making ownership is continuously reexamined; each year, the school’s Program Quality Committee (PQC) solicits feedback from the staff on what decisions they hope to weigh in on, and what they’d prefer school leaders to handle.

Many Washtenaw County students have flourished at WEOC schools (see “Promising Results” on p. 14). For some, that means being engaged and cared for at school for the first time. For others, it means developing critical time management skills or accessing rigorous, college-level coursework. “It’s the best teaching I’ve ever got to do,” says Sean Fountain. “And for some of our kids, it’s the best learning they’ve ever got to do.”



PARTNERING TO EXPAND OPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITY

Washtenaw is one of the most educated counties in the U.S., yet it's also home to some of the most troubling disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes by race and family income.

In 2006, recognizing that some students needed an alternative to the traditional high school experience, leaders from Washtenaw's education, civic, and business communities coalesced around a simple idea: what if there were a different option for kids who hadn't been finding success in their home district?

Thus WEOC was born, a consortium of 9 Washtenaw County school districts working in partnership to provide new options to middle and high school students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The three consortium schools—WAVE, WIHI/WIMA, and ECA@EMU—are centrally located in Ypsilanti—the city in Washtenaw with the highest poverty, and conveniently accessible by public transportation. A Joint Steering Committee (JSC) of member district superintendents governs the consortium.

Monique Uzelac, WEOC's Executive Director, is directly accountable to the JSC. Uzelac, who began her career in business, discovered the benefits of distributed leadership early in her career.

"Sharing decision-making and building our programs' capacity through the teachers and staff who work most closely with our students allows us to truly and authentically center student voice. It also offers teachers a path to leadership that does not force them to leave the classroom, keeping their expertise with our students," Uzelac explains.

So long as WEOC is producing results for kids, the JSC grants Uzelac and her colleagues wide latitude to manage the three programs as they see fit.

MEET WASHTENAW EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS CONSORTIUM

Member Schools

Washtenaw Alliance for Virtual Education (WAVE)

Gr. 7-12, up to age 20

A student-centered, project-based, hybrid (virtual and site-based) learning community for students who want an alternative to the traditional secondary school structure

Early College Alliance at Eastern Michigan University (ECA@EMU)

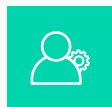
Gr. 9-12

An early college program located on the EMU campus where students can earn college credit while completing their high school degrees

Washtenaw International High School (WIHI) and Middle Academy (WIMA)

Gr. 6-12

An International Baccalaureate middle and high school preparing internationally-minded graduates through a rigorous, inquiry-based, and student-centered education



**WEOC schools are examples
of Innovative Model Schools.**

MEMBER SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Ann Arbor Public Schools · Chelsea School District · Dexter Community Schools · Lincoln Consolidated Schools · Manchester Community Schools · Milan Area Schools · Saline Area Schools · Whitmore Lake Public Schools · Ypsilanti Community Schools · Washtenaw Intermediate School District



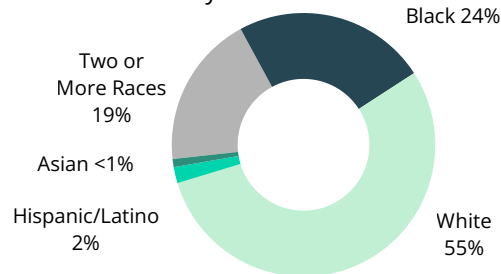
Each district in Washtenaw County maintains an accountability dashboard you can read to learn more about students.

CAMPUS DEMOGRAPHICS | SCHOOL YEAR 2024-2025

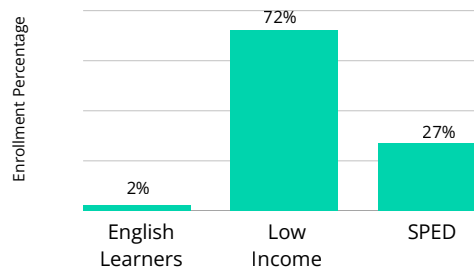
WAVE

Enrollment - 390 students

Race and Ethnicity



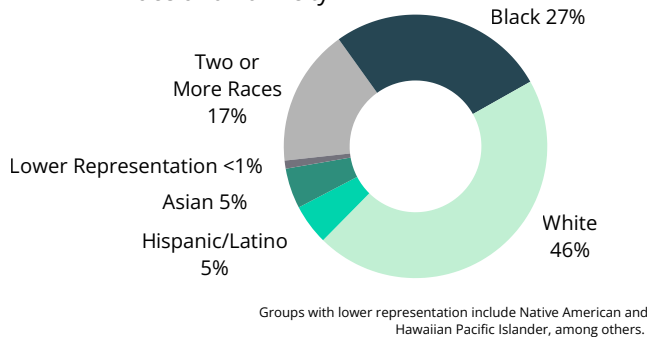
Special Populations



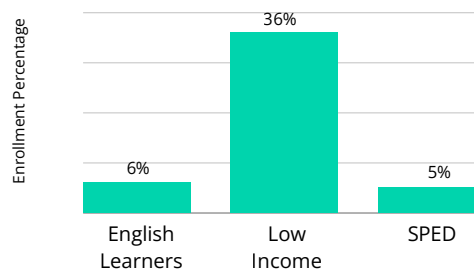
ECA@EMU

Enrollment - 509 students

Race and Ethnicity



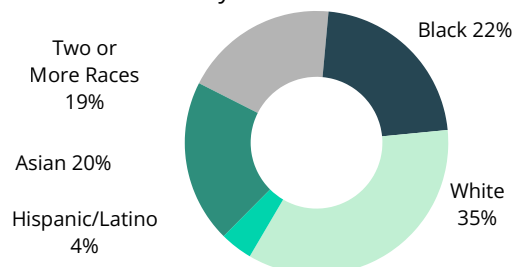
Special Populations



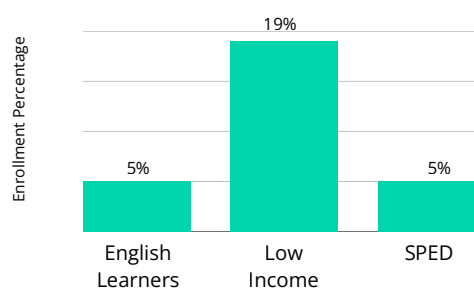
WIHI/WIMA

Enrollment - 739 students

Race and Ethnicity



Special Populations



HOW WEOC IS REIMAGINING TEACHING

A Culture of Shared Decision-Making Supports Ongoing Improvement

All WEOC schools have a Program Quality Committee, or PQC, which meets regularly to develop recommendations pertaining to professional development, calendar, schedule, and rotation of “Schedule B” roles—leadership roles and extra duties for which staff can earn extra pay—among other topics.

Each PQC includes one or more administrators and at least 3 staff members elected from the employees of the school. In addition to formal structures, norms of collaboration facilitate reimagined practices on a more informal basis—what ECA Principal, Ellen Fischer, referred to as an ongoing practice of “figuring it out” across multiple domains:

5 Reimaginings at WEOC

Across WEOC, teachers are meaningfully involved in shaping their schools’ academic programs, working conditions, and patterns of interaction in formal and informal ways.

1 Calendar and Schedule



3 Learning Program



5 Curriculum 

2 Decision-Making Processes

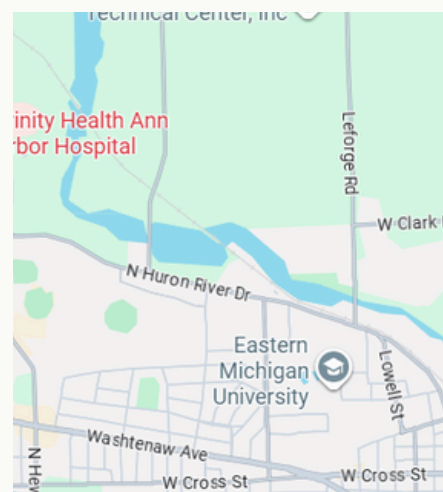


4 Student Relationships



Exploring the Context

The Washtenaw Educational Options Consortium (WEOC) is a teacher-powered partnership between 9 Washtenaw County school districts and the Washtenaw Intermediate School District, its fiscal agent. WEOC offers three secondary school alternatives for students in the member districts. It is headquartered in Ypsilanti, Michigan, a small college town about 8 miles east of Ann Arbor and 35 miles west of Detroit.



View the map to virtually explore about the Washtenaw community.



A WIN-WIN-WIN FOR DISTRICTS, SCHOOLS, AND STUDENTS

At WEOC schools, the latitude to reimagine teaching and learning is predicated on positive outcomes being consistently achieved by students of member districts.

- As part of the consortium arrangement, member districts get to claim WEOC students in their graduation rates and standardized test data.
- Member districts leverage the economies of scale that the consortium provides to offer families in their districts schooling options they would not otherwise have.
- So long as their resident students are experiencing success at WEOC schools, member districts are incentivized to remain part of the consortium and support its schools.

DEEP DIVE | 5 REIMAGININGS EXPLAINED



1 Staff and Student Schedules

Innovation: Students at **ECA@EMU** have personalized schedules that reflect their readiness to pursue college-level coursework. Personalization allows students to take advantage of diverse course offerings at EMU—when they're ready—and affords time to meet one-on-one with teachers. Teachers' courseloads change with the seasons, with lighter loads in the winter and spring as more students are ready for college classes. This allows more dedicated time for student check-ins, staff collaboration, and refinement of instructional materials.

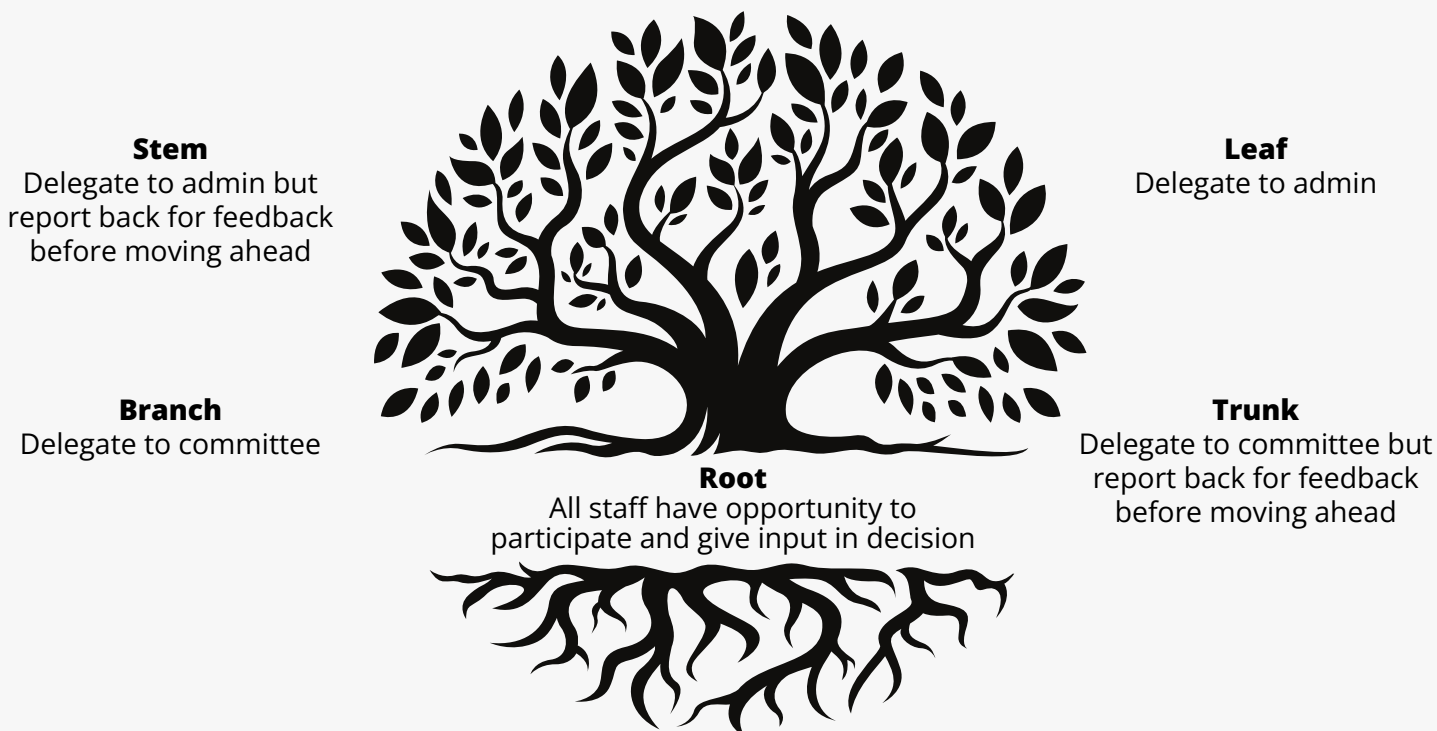
- Teacher leaders create the complex course schedule at ECA each term, with input from staff. The "Scheduling Czar" is one of several "Schedule B" roles in WEOC schools that give teachers extra pay for taking on leadership duties.
- The Scheduling Czarscheduler job rotates every few years, which prevents burnout and allows other staff members the opportunity to flex their logistical muscles. The position is currently shared by two staff members.



2 Decision-Making Processes

Innovation: Teachers and staff at WIHI/WIMA engage in a "Stem and Leaf" vote each fall to weigh in on the decisions they want to have a voice in and those they prefer to delegate to administration (see graphic, below). This year, staff voted to play a more major role in setting long term goals for the school and setting the daily bell schedule, but opted to delegate hiring of support staff and aides to school leaders. The school's PQC recommends the outcomes of the Stem and Leaf process to school administrators for formal codification.

- Not taking decision-making ownership for granted allows the school to revisit decision-making structures as they gain experience and encounter new situations.
- Revisiting participation in decision-making was also common at WAVE and ECA. At ECA, for example, there were times when the staff preferred to defer to the principal, such as in addressing discipline-related issues.



“Stem and Leaf” exercise at WIHI/WIMA to vote on decision-making practices

3 Learning Program

Innovation: WAVE’s learning program features individualized pacing and multi-site, in-person and virtual support to remove barriers to learning. The program is intentionally designed to (1) help students efficiently earn credit toward graduation, and (2) guide students in developing a set of 10 critical competencies that will serve them in school and beyond.

- Because many WAVE high school students have daytime responsibilities (e.g., work, childcare), they are only required to come into school two days a week, and do much of their learning virtually at home or from one of WAVE’s “satellite” locations (e.g., a community library).
- To motivate disengaged students, WAVE teachers develop new courses, often with teachers of other content areas, that are aligned with student interests and earn them credit across multiple subjects.
- With much of the learning taking place online and asynchronously, teachers have more time during the work day to meet one on one with students, collaborate with colleagues to design interdisciplinary courses, and take on teacher leadership roles. Since teachers are not constantly instructing, they have space to reflect, analyze student data, and problem solve.

4 Student Relationships

Innovation: At both **ECA@EMU** and **WAVE**, teachers serve dual roles as instructors and “advisors,” who are responsible for guiding students through their programs. In this case management-style approach, every student is assigned an advisor with whom they meet regularly to set goals, address barriers, and track progress. Since students are generally with the same advisor throughout their high school experience, they tend to develop a close and trusting relationship.

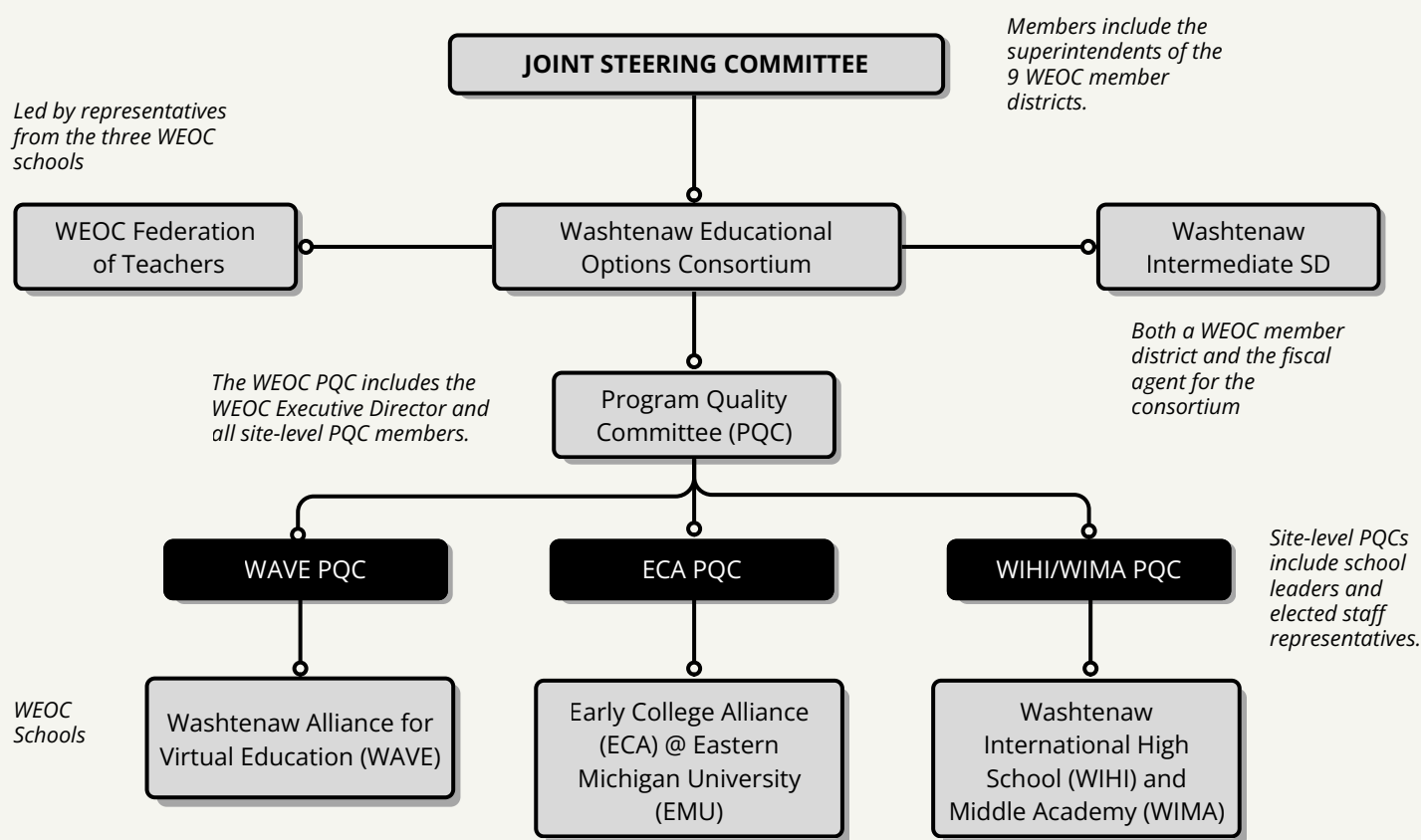
- Unlike advisories in many traditional high schools, the student-advisor relationship at WEOC schools is more personalized and flexible. A student at ECA@EMU, for example, required frequent check-ins in their freshman year while they learned to manage their time responsibly.
- For teachers, having sustained, close relationships with students is rewarding. Amos Briscoe, an art teacher and advisor at WAVE, hears frequently from current and former advisees about the impact he had on them. Briscoe attributes the strong relationships he has developed with students to the flexible time he has during the work day to respond to their needs, made possible by WAVE’s hybrid programming. “It makes me feel like a genuine human,” Briscoe says, comparing his experience to a more traditional setting where teachers have less unscheduled time to meet one-on-one with students.

5 Curriculum

Innovation: Over the years, **ECA@EMU** staff have designed a core “Soft Skills” curriculum, which is taught across all content areas and reinforced by advisors. Staff had discovered that gaps in students’ time management and self-advocacy skills proved to be a greater barrier to success in college classes than their academic preparation. A Soft Skills Committee revises the bound curriculum every year. As for academic content—teachers are treated as professionals and afforded considerable freedom in determining how they teach the state standards, so long as students are continuing to demonstrate mastery of the material.

- Curricular autonomy is consistent across WEOC schools, which reduces teacher burnout and improves their sense of efficacy. Richard Albrecht, now an Assistant Principal at WIHI/WIMA, described experiencing burnout a few years back as a history teacher. The principal encouraged him to redesign his classes to be more student-centered and engaging. The result was not only better student learning outcomes but also a renewed enthusiasm for the job for Albrecht.

FORMAL STRUCTURES AT THE WASHTENAW EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS CONSORTIUM



HOW POLICY ENABLED THESE REIMAGININGS

Below are several policy provisions and structural arrangements that grant WEOC schools site-level autonomy and promote continuous program improvement.

✔ **Shared Educational Entities (SEEs) and the Sending Scores Back Program**

WEOC is an example of a Shared Educational Entity (SEE), a consortium of Michigan public school districts governed by a cooperative agreement (similar to Boards of Cooperative Educational Services or intermediate school districts in other states). According to Michigan statute, SEEs are required to “[send back](#)” state assessment scores and graduation data to enrolled students’ home districts. This incentivizes participating districts to support the success of WEOC and hold it accountable for achieving positive student outcomes.

✔ **Consortium Agreement**

An agreement between WEOC, the 9 member school districts, and Washtenaw ISD provides the underlying framework for WEOC’s management and governance. The agreement lays out the responsibilities of the member districts, Washtenaw ISD as the consortium’s fiscal agent, and WEOC’s Executive Director. It also describes the process for calculating the support payments member districts are obligated to pay for their enrolled students’ participation in WEOC programs (roughly proportional to the district’s secondary enrollment), as well as the amount of funds to which Washtenaw ISD is entitled to use to fulfill its role as fiscal agent. Member districts pass along 95% of their state per-pupil aid (for resident students and open-enrolled students who choose WEOC schools) to WEOC, keeping 5%. WEOC pays Washtenaw ISD for consortium-related expenses at the federal indirect reimbursement rate, and for special education staff costs that are not reimbursed through federal IDEA funds.

✔ **Teacher-Powered Union Agreement**

In July 2025, WEOC signed an agreement with the WEOC Federation of Teachers, recently formed to promote transparency and shared decision-making between WEOC, school administrators, and consortium teachers. In its preamble, the agreement explicitly affirms a teacher-powered approach to decision-making that honors teachers’ professional judgment and voice on matters that impact teaching and learning. The agreement also clarifies the role and authority of the teacher-majority Program Quality Committee (PQC) as well as pay for “Schedule B” teacher leadership roles.



“ **The parties agree to work collaboratively to incorporate components of the Teacher Powered Schools framework, which entrusts teachers to be key decision makers within the Consortium Programs.** ”

Excerpt from the WEOC & WEOC-FT contract



See the Agreement

Review the [Consortium Agreement](#) to understand how these policies were codified.



Get Support

Empower Schools provides technical assistance to districts and supporting entities creating flexible and sustainable agreements. To start your Innovation School journey, contact Empower at empowerschools.org/contact

PROMISING RESULTS

WEOC schools are demonstrating success for their respective student populations. WIHI boasts a 100% graduation rate and a 100% college acceptance rate. ECA@EMU graduates complete bachelors degrees at a much higher rate than Michigan students overall (77% vs 30%), with students completing 90% of their college courses with a C or better. And WAVE has become a learning haven for students at risk of dropping out, such as teen parents, students with mental health challenges, and students who need to work.

Consortium Outcomes by the Numbers



100%

of WIHI seniors graduated in 2025 and were accepted into college.¹



90%+

WAVE satisfaction on the senior exit survey, one of the highest in the county.



\$35,000

maximum tuition value of the 65 college credits ECA@EMU students can graduate with. Students receive these credits for free.²



#20

WEOC rank among Michigan's Top Workplaces by the Detroit Free Press in 2021 (50–149 employees).⁴

6-10%

greater teacher teacher retention per campus than the state average.

Teacher retention at WEOC schools exceeded the state average (91% at WAVE, 89% at ECA@EMU, and 87% at WIHI—compared to 81% statewide).³



“ I was 15, had recently dropped out of high school, and was having mental health problems. A friend told me about WAVE, and I enrolled myself. What made the difference for me was always the staff. WAVE has done a good job of finding people who teach, care about the mission, and actually want students to succeed. The staff went beyond the academic side of students’ lives. They made sure we were fed, made sure when I was not in a good spot, pulled me aside and asked if I was OK. Things could have been a lot worse for me if I didn’t choose to involve myself in WAVE.”

- EZRA, FORMER WAVE STUDENT

[1] WEOC administrative data
[2] WEOC administrative data
[3] *Michigan School Data, 2022-2023 (latest available; WIMA not shown)*
[4] Detroit Free Press, 2021

MAKE IT YOUR OWN

Questions and Activities to practice to apply the reimgainings found in this study.

Finding flexibility in state law

- How could intermediate school districts in your state, or other types of collaborative education entities, create opportunities for new kinds of schools with new roles for teachers? Are there opportunities to shift practices in existing schools?
- At WEOC, several state laws enabled consortium schools to innovate in response to student needs. What flexibilities, waivers, or other opportunities are present in state law or rules that your school or district could take advantage of to remove barriers to reimagining the teacher role?
- What opportunities exist for school-level autonomy to make programmatic changes in response to student needs? What are the barriers?

Establishing a culture of teacher ownership

- In existing schools, how are teachers' voices currently heard? Do teachers see their perspectives translated into changes that benefit teaching and learning? Consider engaging in a year of shared leadership redesign to allow teachers time to imagine and co-create new decision-making structures and processes.
- School culture is notoriously hard to change, so the startup period for a new school or program is an ideal time to establish a culture of shared leadership where teachers are empowered to problem-solve. For schools just getting off the ground, how can teachers be engaged at the outset in major programmatic and operations decisions?

Deciding on decisions: who has a say on what?

- Teachers at WEOC appreciated knowing where they had a voice in decisions that impacted them. They also had a voice in determining which decisions they would make and which they would leave to administrators.
- In what areas do teachers wish they had more say?
- If teachers do not currently "show up" in decision-making contexts, why not? Explore barriers to their participation—such as lack of time or frustration with previous opportunities to participate.

