

FEATURE STORY

# A 20-Year Track Record

OF TRANSFORMING AMERICAN K-12 EDUCATION

In every endeavor, people make the difference. Lowell Milken discovered this guiding principle when he was a student at Hesby Street Elementary School in California's San Fernando Valley. He was privileged to benefit from the leadership of outstanding teachers, namely his fifth and sixth grade teachers, Mr. Lew Fosse and Mr. Elliot Sutton. They were compassionate, caring, and brought content to life. Lowell and his classmates were encouraged to think independently, develop a deep awareness of their place in the world, and internalize qualities of character that are essential to developing productive citizens. Building the knowledge, skills, and experiences of people played such a central role in Lowell's success that more than three decades ago, he decided to honor the one profession that made all others possible: *teaching*.

## THE BIG IDEA:

**In 1987, Lowell Milken founded the Milken Educator Awards to recognize exceptional teachers with \$25,000 in cash prizes. The effort quickly grew into the nation's preeminent teacher recognition program, garnering the participation of every state and coalescing a national network of excellence that is more than 2,800 educators strong today.**

After visiting thousands of Milken Educator classrooms, Lowell discovered that, while acknowledging excellence

was a worthy goal, a larger, ever-present problem remained: Access to an effective teacher was unequal, and far too many students were not receiving the quality educational opportunities they greatly needed and deserved. The quality of education varied not only from school to school, but from room to room. In high-need communities, the conditions were even worse. On the cusp of a new millennium, Lowell began to develop a bold initiative to transform American education by elevating and prioritizing teacher excellence.



# Creating TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement

**Around 2000, the education community was divided between two opposing views for improving teacher quality. On one side were those tied closely to the status quo of rewarding advanced degrees and longevity over effectiveness.**

On the other were those Lowell described as “so dispirited by the system” that they were prepared to abandon it altogether and build something new. Behind the scenes, Lowell was quietly developing a revolutionary third option, one that honored the essence of the education system yet sought to change its structure – placing talented teacher leaders at the center of efforts to improve schools.

This innovative, comprehensive approach was known as The TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement. The TAP System was the result of extensive work with an expert team of researchers, discussions with an advisory board of educators and education leaders, feedback from hundreds of educators, and classroom observations.

“Good teachers are to education what education is to all other professions,” Lowell said during his introduction of TAP at the 1999 Milken National Education Conference. “They are the indispensable element, the sunlight and oxygen, the foundation on which everything else is built.” The TAP System focuses on attracting, developing, motivating, and retaining high-quality teachers through four key elements: multiple career paths, ongoing

applied professional growth, instructionally focused accountability, and performance-based compensation. This comprehensive approach is as relevant and revolutionary today as it was 20 years ago.

## EARLY ADOPTERS

Upon Lowell’s announcement of TAP at the 1999 conference, education chiefs from Arizona (Lisa Graham Keegan), Arkansas (Ray Simon), and South Carolina (Inez Tenenbaum) expressed immediate interest in TAP implementation. Arizona became the first state to implement TAP in 2000, followed by South Carolina in 2001, and Arkansas in 2002. Partnerships exist in all three states today. Louisiana, one of NIET’s largest partner states, started implementation in 2003.

Early successes in these states fueled the quick expansion of TAP, as leaders across the political spectrum and at all levels of education – local to federal – showed strong interest and support. In 2005, Lowell Milken announced the formation of the TAP Foundation, which became the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching later that year, as a nonprofit public charity to manage the rapid expansion of the TAP System. Establishing this level of sustained, focused oversight of TAP opened the door to new partnerships in districts and schools across the country. *Continued Next Page*

## HOW TAP WORKS:



**TAP’s interconnected elements build in the tools and supports schools need to establish teacher leadership teams; guide conversations and protocols that define and support excellent instruction; and embed time for regular feedback, follow-up, mentoring, and strategy assessment and evaluation. Because individual educational needs drive implementation, TAP is able to work in any setting.**



*In 2016, Lowell Milken traveled to Iberia Parish in Louisiana to present Devon Willis-Jones, then principal at Jeanerette Elementary School, with the prestigious Milken Educator Award. She earned the recognition in part because of the improvements her school had shown through partnering with NIET to provide teachers with leadership opportunities, job-embedded professional development, and meaningful feedback. Willis-Jones now works for NIET as a senior program specialist.*

## A FEDERAL BREAKTHROUGH

**In 2006, NIET's leaders celebrated a major milestone in federal funding for TAP's reforms: the enactment of the multimillion-dollar Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF). The level of funding provided was unprecedented for the development and implementation of performance-based teacher and principal compensation systems in high-need schools.**

Now formally authorized as the Teacher and School Leader Incentive Program, or TSL, the initiative continues to align to the principles of NIET by funding key support structures for teachers, including career pathways that diversify roles and incentives to attract, support, reward, and retain the most effective teachers and administrators at high-need schools.

In 2010, more than \$300 million in TIF grants were awarded to NIET partner schools across the country, doubling NIET's reach to more than 20,000 teachers and 200,000 students by the 2011-12 school year. TIF funds continued to support TAP projects, and notably, NIET received a \$49 million grant in 2016 to support several districts and schools in Louisiana. In October 2019, NIET was awarded a \$47 million TSL grant to support partnerships in three Indiana districts.

Over the years, NIET has become a recognized and respected policy leader. Following the 2015 enactment of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), NIET's principles of effectiveness are now embedded into K-12 education law and aligned with federal requirements. NIET partners also use Title II funds to provide some of the highest-need schools in the U.S. with the resources necessary to attract, develop, motivate, and retain talented educators over the long term. ***Continued Next Page***



## NIET'S GRADUATION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Part of the nation's focus on increasing educator effectiveness has been ensuring that teacher preparation programs have the right tools to equip teacher candidates for the challenges and expectations of the classroom.

In 2009, then U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan urged universities preparing new teacher candidates to make student outcomes the "overarching mission that propels all of their efforts."

At that time, the U.S. Department of Education projected that in 2014, up to 1 million teaching positions would be filled by new teachers.

NIET quickly identified the opportunity to lead and knew that pairing its research-based instructional rubric with real-time application in schools would give universities a valuable tool to help prepare their aspiring teachers for the classroom. Arizona State University (ASU) and Texas

Tech University (TTU) - home to two of the country's most forward-thinking teacher preparation programs - were the first to introduce NIET's rubric into their curricula. ASU began a partnership with NIET in 2009, and TTU signed on as a partner in 2013 through a federal Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grant. ASU was also included in a separate SEED grant and was a natural fit given its proven results with TAP.

Not only did these projects strengthen instruction at the university level and help faculty create a common language around great teaching, but they also created a pipeline of teacher talent for K-12 schools.

What's more, the "grow your own" aspect of these initiatives has attracted community residents to teaching, inspiring these new teachers to give back to their hometowns, stay with area schools, and ultimately help students excel. *Continued Next Page*



*To address a growing and significant shortage of teachers with expertise in STEM fields, Arizona State University and several high-need K-12 districts across Arizona joined NIET to design solutions with the support of a federal Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grant in 2013. The partnership prepared highly skilled middle and high school math and science teachers, pairing intensive classroom preparation with quality training in STEM subjects, and placing these new STEM teachers in high-need districts and schools.*

## STATEWIDE PARTNERSHIPS

Starting in the early- and mid-2000s, states such as Minnesota and South Carolina looked to NIET's TAP System as a model for state legislation and policy. Minnesota's Quality Compensation (QComp) law, enacted in 2005, includes four components that closely reflect the key tenets of TAP: career ladder/advancement options, job-embedded professional development, teacher evaluation, and performance pay and alternative salary schedule. South Carolina approved TAP as a viable option for professional development funding. Over the years, Louisiana, Texas, and Indiana have also enacted state policies that reflect TAP's key elements.

2010 marked a milestone in the growth of NIET's state partnerships. The Tennessee Department of Education included NIET's teaching standards as the basis for feedback and observation, including them in the Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model (TEAM), which rolled out to districts statewide in 2011. By 2013, Tennessee was the fastest-improving state in the country on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly known as the Nation's Report Card.

Based on the success in Tennessee, NIET was awarded a contract with the Ohio Department of Education to design training and support tools around the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System (OTES). The Ohio portal now includes

more than 12,000 certified evaluators who benefit from the sophisticated training system complete with video, modules, live-streaming, and more.

The growing number of partners seeking NIET's depth of expertise to develop and implement educator effectiveness systems inspired NIET to create broader Best Practice services in teacher leadership, professional development, observation and feedback, and strategic compensation systems. The power of NIET's offerings was and remains that they are customizable to meet the needs of states, districts, and schools while remaining rooted in TAP's proven principles.

NIET's expanded focus and flexibility paved the way for additional state partnerships, including with the Texas Education Agency through the development and pilot of the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS) in 2014 and statewide launch two years later, and in being approved as an expert partner for Texas' state school improvement grants. NIET also began meeting with Iowa leaders and has since supported the rollout of the Iowa Teacher Leadership and Compensation (TLC) System in 2016 and launch of the NIET Iowa Instructional Framework, which provides educators with a common language to analyze, discuss, and improve classroom teaching.

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***South Carolina's multi-year rollout of the South Carolina Teaching Standards 4.0 has allowed teachers to better grasp the expectations before they are fully implemented. Dr. Ann Shaw, a former South Carolina master teacher and Milken Educator, has led trainings across the state with both educators and higher education partners who want to ensure aspiring teachers understand the rubric before they have a classroom of their own.***



*Dr. Candice McQueen joined NIET as CEO in 2019, and she visited partners across the country in her first few weeks, including schools in Orangeburg Consolidated School District.*

## THE FUTURE OF NIET

NIET celebrates two decades of progress with former Tennessee Commissioner of Education Dr. Candice McQueen as its CEO. Dr. McQueen is leading a comprehensive, collaborative vision-setting and strategic planning process focused on ensuring that NIET continues to successfully partner with states, districts, schools, and universities to enhance educator excellence. She is also actively expanding NIET's reach and services with attention to innovative practices that provide equitable opportunities for all students.

Central to Dr. McQueen's vision are new innovations that build on NIET's most successful practices that have sustained the test of time. These include developing further support and tools specifically for principals and higher education leaders, as well as helping NIET's long-standing partners take their work to the next level. At each turn, NIET has remained committed to the principles that Lowell Milken outlined 20 years ago when he led a group of experts and educators to define great teaching and develop a system for supporting it. ●

**NOW, THERE ARE MORE POSSIBILITIES THAN EVER**  
for how educators can discover their own excellence.