

FEATURE STORY

A 25-Year Track Record

OF TRANSFORMING K-12 EDUCATION BY ELEVATING GREAT CLASSROOM TEACHING



Building the knowledge, skills, and experiences of people has played a central role in Lowell Milken's success, and more than three decades ago, he decided to honor the one profession that makes all others possible: *teaching*. In 1987, Lowell Milken founded the Milken Educator Awards to recognize exceptional teachers with \$25,000 cash prizes. The effort quickly grew into the nation's preeminent teacher recognition program, forming a national network of excellence that is more than

3,000 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 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.

GENERATING EXCELLENCE THROUGH TAP

In the past, American education was chronically unable to reliably upgrade instruction across classrooms. This challenge is particularly daunting as states adopt new learning standards and encourage the use of high-quality curricula that require teachers to change their instructional practices in significant ways. Too often, efforts to elevate the profession fail to address the issues teachers themselves point to as problems: isolation and lack of access to collaborative learning and teamwork, few opportunities for career advancement or additional compensation, and inadequate feedback for improvement.

To address these challenges, Lowell envisioned a revolutionary approach — 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.

HOW THE TAP SYSTEM WORKS:

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

This innovative, comprehensive approach became known as the TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement. The TAP System was the result of feedback from hundreds of educators and classroom observations, extensive work with an expert team of researchers, and discussions with an advisory board of educators and education leaders. NIET's TAP System is designed to ensure that every student, in every school, has an excellent teacher every day.

"Good teachers are to education what education is to all other professions," Lowell said during his introduction of TAP in 1999. "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 25 years ago, with powerful new evidence of its impact.

EARLY ADOPTERS AND IMPACT

Upon Lowell's announcement of TAP, education chiefs from Arizona (Lisa Graham Keegan), Arkansas (Ray Simon), and South Carolina (Inez Tenenbaum) expressed immediate interest in implementing TAP. Arizona became the first state to implement TAP in 2000, followed quickly by South Carolina, Arkansas, Indiana, and Louisiana, paving the way for TAP's sustainability and expansion.

Leaders across the political spectrum and at all levels of

education — local to federal — showed strong interest and support for the TAP System. In 2005, Lowell Milken announced the formation of the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching as a nonprofit to manage the rapid expansion of the TAP System and its impactful practices. Establishing this level of sustained, focused oversight of TAP opened the door to new partnerships in districts and schools across the country.

SCALING UP TAP'S INNOVATIVE APPROACH

In 2006, based on early proof points of successful impact, Congress enacted the multimillion-dollar Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF). The level of funding provided was unprecedented for the development and implementation of systems to support state and district innovation in building instructional capacity through

teacher leadership roles, opportunities for additional responsibility and compensation, and strong school leadership teams in high-need schools. In 2010, more than \$300 million in TIF grants was 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.

To continue the investment of TIF, Congress formally authorized the Teacher and School Leader (TSL) Incentive Program. The TSL program continues to align with the principles of TAP and 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. The 2015 enactment of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) enshrined these principles for building and sustaining talent into K-12 education law.

In October 2019, NIET was awarded a \$47 million TSL grant to support partnerships in Indiana districts. In the last five years, partnerships in Texas and Arizona were funded through TSL, catalyzing innovation and advancing state policies to improve teacher effectiveness

and retention in classrooms serving students with the highest needs. As these systems are put in place across the country, their success has a significant impact. NIET partners are sustaining innovative team-based staffing and compensation reforms using Title I and Title II funds, resulting in improvements in recruiting and retaining talented educators. In addition to improving the effectiveness and retention of teachers already working in K-12 schools, NIET and its partners have also focused on building a more robust pipeline of new teachers.

STRENGTHENING THE NEW TEACHER PIPELINE

From early on, NIET worked with teacher preparation programs to better equip teacher candidates for the challenges and expectations of the classroom while preparing and encouraging them to teach students with greater needs.

NIET knew that pairing its research-based instructional rubric with real-time application in schools would give universities a valuable tool to help prepare



aspiring teachers for the classroom. Arizona State University (ASU) and Texas Tech University (TTU) — which offer 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.

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 high-need K-12 schools.

What's more, the grow-your-own aspect of these initiatives has attracted community residents to teaching, inspiring these

NIET's *Teaching and Learning Standards Rubric* is research-based and provides teachers and leaders with detailed descriptions of strong classroom practices across instructional indicators. The rubric is a critical tool to support the changes in instruction necessary for the implementation of high-quality instructional materials. In 2021, NIET responded to the needs of teacher candidates and university faculty by releasing the *Aspiring Teacher Rubric*, focused on the most important practices for teacher candidates to master and now in use across more than 100 teacher preparation programs nationwide.

new teachers to give back to their hometowns, stay with area schools, diversify the teaching workforce, and ultimately help students excel.

STATEWIDE POLICIES AND PARTNERSHIPS

Since the early years of TAP, a number of states have implemented policies that closely reflect the key components of the TAP System. In 2005, Minnesota's Quality Compensation law included four components that closely reflect the key tenets of TAP: career ladder/advancement options, job-embedded professional development, teacher evaluation with more effective feedback, performance-based compensation, and an alternative salary schedule. South Carolina approved TAP statewide 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.

NIET marked a milestone in the growth of state partnerships in 2010. The Tennessee Department of Education used 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.

Ohio and Louisiana have partnered with NIET to strengthen classroom observation and

feedback and develop video resources that provide teachers and coaches with clear examples of what strong teaching practices look and sound like in classrooms.

The growing number of partners seeking NIET's expertise to develop and implement educator effectiveness systems inspired NIET to create additional training and services in teacher leadership, professional development, observation and feedback, and strategic compensation systems. The power of NIET's offerings is 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. In 2014, the Texas Education Agency partnered with NIET

In 2024, NIET published a new book in partnership with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). *Unleashing Teacher Leadership: A Toolkit for Ensuring Effective Instruction in Every Classroom* examines best practices and tools that teacher leaders can use to unlock their power and drive lasting instructional improvement across schools and districts. The book shares lessons learned with teacher leaders engaged in this work and dozens of NIET-developed tools for educators to unleash the power of effective teacher leadership in their own schools and districts.



for the development and pilot of the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS). NIET was also involved in its statewide launch two years later

and has been approved as an expert partner for Texas' state school improvement grants. NIET also supported the rollout of the Iowa Teacher Leadership and

Compensation (TLC) System in 2016, and provided training to more than 100 districts across the state to analyze, discuss, and improve classroom teaching. Our support has continued to expand to additional states, including Arkansas, where state funding for teacher leadership designations is building instructional leadership capacity and creating new leadership pipelines in schools.

THE FUTURE OF NIET

NIET celebrates 25 years of progress with Dr. Joshua Barnett as Chief Executive Officer. After more than 10 years with the organization, Dr. Barnett brings a deep understanding of the challenges and opportunities for successful partnerships with states, districts, schools, and universities to enhance educator excellence. His knowledge of the



most successful practices and policies for empowering teacher leaders and driving instructional improvement at all levels of the K-12 system are taking NIET's work to the next level.

Central to Dr. Barnett's vision is providing equitable opportunities for all students, particularly students facing greater barriers to learning. Dr. Barnett and the more than 100 team members at NIET remain committed to the principles that Lowell Milken first outlined 25 years ago when he led a group of experts and educators to define great teaching and develop a system for generating more of it to create opportunities for all students. ●

WHY TEACHER LEADERSHIP

“My goal was to put in place on the ground a system to achieve meaningful and sustained improvements in teacher practices and student learning. A key component of our success has been the focus on teacher leadership. Teacher leaders are too often an untapped resource for improving our nation's schools, yet we have seen again and again that the establishment of formal teacher leader roles elevates the profession and attracts effective educators to our schools.”

LOWELL MILKEN
FOUNDER AND CHAIRMAN
NIET