

## FEATURE STORY

# Advancing Best Practices into Policy

Since 1999, NIET has worked with states and districts across the country to identify effective practices for improving teaching and learning, strengthen systems that reinforce those practices, share valuable lessons learned in classrooms, and inform policies to better support teachers and students.

## IMPROVING INSTRUCTION AT SCALE



As policymakers have looked for innovative ways to accelerate teacher development and help schools meet ambitious goals, NIET's TAP System has stood out as an effective and comprehensive approach to building educator excellence and increasing student achievement. TAP's research-based practices help create systems for measurable improvement in student learning across a range of school communities and settings and build capacity for continuous school improvement. As a result, the core elements of TAP — teacher leadership roles, ongoing professional learning,

aligned feedback and support for teachers, and opportunities for additional compensation based on performance — directly influenced a federal grant program: the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF). Since its establishment, the TIF program, now known as the Teacher and School Leader (TSL) Incentive Program, has funded projects in over 300 rural, suburban, and urban school districts across 36 states.

Multiple states have led the way in supporting districts to shift to more effective professional learning models.

**IN TEXAS:** A series of state-level grants, including the Learning Acceleration Support Opportunities (LASO) grant, support a comprehensive approach to improvement and give districts the resources for professional learning, making it more relevant, timely, and responsive to teacher and student needs.

**IN ARKANSAS:** Teacher leader designations created by the Arkansas Department of Education have elevated and trained teacher leaders, many of whom are now members of school instructional leadership teams where they can lead professional learning and provide classroom coaching.

NIET's work with the Arkansas Rural Educator Network (AREN) created connections between rural school leaders and trained them to use teacher leaders to provide rich professional development and coaching to peers, reducing the need to rely on a limited supply of external professional development providers.



Desert Thunder School, Avondale Elementary School District, Arizona

**NATIONWIDE:** Lessons learned through NIET’s partnerships played pivotal roles in informing the development of the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which includes an updated definition of professional development, shifting the concept of professional learning from one-off workshops to activities that “are sustained, intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused.” This definition provides a strong guide for schools on how to structure professional learning in a way that truly facilitates teacher growth — and it opens the door for teacher leaders to play pivotal roles.

“My experience in policy and practice is that teacher leadership is a catalyst for improvement in both teaching and learning. As leaders focus on how to improve instruction across a district, teacher leadership is a strategy they would do well to explore.”

**RAY SIMON**

FORMER U.S. DEPUTY SECRETARY OF  
EDUCATION AND CHIEF STATE SCHOOL  
OFFICER IN ARKANSAS



Slaughter Elementary School, East Feliciana Public Schools, Louisiana

## SUPPORTING NEW TEACHERS

The first years of a teacher's career are perhaps the most critical to their professional development. Many schools supported by NIET provide new teachers with intensive support systems, dedicated mentor teachers, and professional learning opportunities that help them develop into more effective teachers. Louisiana and Texas are among the states that are strengthening the role of mentor teachers using NIET's expertise.

**IN LOUISIANA:** Since 2014, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE)

has awarded grants to teacher preparation providers and their school system partners to advance a shift to full-year residencies for all aspiring teachers. The state has since prepared thousands of trained mentor teachers to support year-long residents, and BESE cited NIET as "a partner with proven experience" in helping districts train and implement mentor teacher roles.

**IN TEXAS:** NIET is an approved partner for the Texas Education Agency's Mentor Program Allotment (MPA), which provides funding to districts for the

development or sustainment of mentorship programs that pair new teachers with mentors who have a demonstrated record of success. Consistent with NIET's holistic approach, district and school administrators participate in the training alongside mentor teachers to ensure a common language is adopted within districts and to develop a system-wide culture that continues to contribute to the mentor program over time.

## Leading the Implementation of High-Quality Literacy Curricula

High-quality lessons call upon students to ask questions, build context, and work together to take ownership of their learning and build strong foundations for literacy. In Tennessee, educators are using high-quality curricula to accelerate student outcomes through the Tennessee Literacy Implementation Networks. NIET is a leading partner, helping to ensure that teachers across the state have the skills and knowledge they need to support student achievement.

## SHARING A VISION FOR GREAT CLASSROOM TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teachers need clear and consistent support to master the instructional skills required to deliver a high-quality curriculum. As larger numbers of teachers enter the classroom through nontraditional preparation and career experiences, maintaining

a shared vision of strong classroom teaching grounded in research and proven effective in schools is important.

States must define good teaching and create systems to foster it at scale if they want to nurture

teacher growth in every school. In the past two decades, NIET has helped states navigate these challenges through the development and adoption of statewide instructional frameworks for teaching. The NIET *Teaching and Learning Standards Rubric*



Mansfield High School,  
DeSoto Parish Schools, Louisiana



Lockett Elementary School,  
Orangeburg County School  
District, South Carolina

provides a holistic, evidence-based set of practices for growing instructional effectiveness and strengthening classroom observation and feedback.

Statewide teaching standards establish a common language for great instruction and a clear vision for excellent teaching that facilitates student achievement. Multiple states have adopted NIET's instructional rubric in whole or in part based on the results of schools and districts in their state that have used the rubric to improve student learning.

**IN LOUISIANA:** Building on the successful use of NIET's instructional rubrics in districts, the state adopted a new evaluation system in 2022 that connects observation and feedback with coaching plans. NIET provided statewide training for more than 8,000 educators on the Louisiana Educator Advancement and Development System (LEADS) in 2024.

**IN SOUTH CAROLINA:** In 2018, NIET's rubric was instrumental in the development of South Carolina Teaching Standards 4.0. NIET provided

training on teaching standards to both districts and educator preparation programs across the state to ensure alignment between teacher candidates' preparation experience and districts' expectations for quality instruction before the statewide rollout.

**IN TEXAS:** After piloting NIET's TAP System for teacher classroom observation in 50 school districts in 2014, the state contracted NIET to help design the teacher observation and feedback portion of its revamped evaluation system, T-TESS (Texas Teacher Evaluation

## Strategic Staffing and Compensation in High-Need Schools

NIET believes that exceptional teachers should be rewarded for their expertise and ability to impact student learning. Great teachers also deserve career advancement opportunities that allow them to use their instructional expertise and earn additional compensation for taking on additional responsibilities. These principles of NIET's work have informed important state-led efforts to help ensure that excellent teachers are recognized for their skills and accomplishments.

Enacted in 2019, the Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA) in Texas is a landmark policy to attract and retain talented teachers in high-need, rural districts through the use of additional opportunities for compensation. TIA provides funds for effective teachers, attracting promising new teachers with competitive starting salaries to schools that often face staffing shortages and high teacher turnover rates.

and Support System). NIET also supported the state in building an online portal to house teacher evaluation data and resources.

**IN TENNESSEE:** The Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model (TEAM), a system for teacher evaluation and support, uses the domains and indicators of NIET's rubric. NIET provided in-depth training and certification for thousands of educators throughout Tennessee and offered an online portal for annual evaluator certification and video-based resources for teachers.

**IN IOWA:** The state Teacher Leadership and Compensation System provides funding for teacher leader positions in each school district. NIET trained teacher and school leaders in over 100 school districts and higher-education institutions across the state using the NIET Instructional

Framework with Aligned Supports for Iowa, a research-based instructional framework to improve teaching and learning.

These developments are a promising sign that schools across our nation are increasingly providing teachers with the support necessary to grow their practices and help students excel. These policies, combined with NIET's work over the years, have helped schools make strides toward the goal of ensuring every student has access to a teacher capable of providing an excellent and equitable education. While there is far more work to be done to reach this goal, the path forward is clearer than ever: If we invest in teacher leadership and meaningful systems for professional learning and coaching, educators — and their students — will thrive. ●

Teacher leaders are essential to the implementation of high-quality instructional materials and the higher levels of learning necessary for students to reach their goals. Multiple statewide initiatives to advance teacher leadership are creating opportunities for collaboration and having a measurable impact on student outcomes.