

Excellent Teachers. Effective Leaders. Every Day.



BY LOWELL MILKEN, FOUNDER AND CHAIRMAN OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

I know from my own experience, whether in philanthropy or in business, that in every endeavor, people make the difference. This is especially true in education. Decades of research have confirmed that the most powerful lever for eliminating equity gaps and raising achievement levels for all students is talented educators who support them.

As a student at Hesby Street Elementary School in California's San Fernando Valley, I was privileged to benefit from the leadership of outstanding teachers — namely my fifth and sixth grade teachers, Mr. Lew Fosse and Mr. Elliot Sutton. They were warm, caring coaches and demanding instructional leaders who encouraged us to think critically and independently,

develop a deep awareness of our responsibilities in the world, and internalize qualities of character that are essential to developing as productive citizens.

My experience in their classrooms was one of the driving forces behind my decision, more than three decades ago, to honor the one profession that prepares all others: teaching. The Milken

Educator Awards, created in 1985, recognize, celebrate, and support greatness in the field of education. Milken Educators from each state are recognized with financial prizes of \$25,000, and this year, I had the honor of recognizing the 3,000th recipient.

Visiting thousands of classrooms over the years, I have seen that excellence and teacher leadership are essential to improving classroom instruction across a building. If we do not enlist talented teachers with the responsibility of developing the skills, knowledge, and useful experiences of their peers, how can we ensure students schoolwide are receiving quality educational opportunities? Imagine how much Mr. Sutton's impact could have been multiplied had he been given the opportunity to lead other teachers!

Today, too many teachers still work in silos. Those who have leadership roles are rarely part of a system or structure to hone their skills, let alone given the adequate time, accountability, and authority to effectively carry them out. This is not for a lack of volition: A 2019 article from ASCD cited research that shows new teachers are looking for leadership opportunities, and educators across NIET's nationwide partnerships have

consistently shared over the years how desirous they are for roles that allow them to lead adults, not just students.

With the need to attract, develop, and retain talent in the teaching profession and the growing demands of implementing high-quality curricula, investments in building capacity at the school level are essential. In schools that partner with NIET, teacher leadership is central to strengthening instruction and improving student achievement. Principals do not go it alone. Teacher leaders work with administrators to build school leadership teams that drive the school's instructional program. Daily collaboration is commonplace at NIET partner schools — in both meeting rooms and classrooms. Expectations to move every student forward are clear, and all educators work toward a shared vision for educational excellence.

Educators are motivated because they are supported. Professional learning is directly tied to their needs and the needs of their students. Contrary to most professional development, this learning continues beyond the scheduled sessions, with teacher leaders visiting classrooms freely to co-teach, model strategies, and provide

actionable feedback. As teachers thrive, students achieve.

By establishing these structures, NIET partner schools have seen historic student achievement. In 2023, the National Bureau of Economic Research highlighted the impact of NIET's TAP System in South Carolina on high school graduation rates, as well as longer-term socioeconomic measures. Researchers estimated implementation of TAP resulted in a 14-to-1 return on investment. Similarly, high-performing schools that once plateaued now have the tools to pinpoint areas of need, set goals, and work as a team to soar to greater heights.

Success can be achieved in every educational setting because it is led by educators who have the talent, courage, and conviction to do more, risk more, and share more. They are supported by leaders at the school, district, state, and university levels who help drive educational excellence and ensure measurable results. Only with these collective efforts can we create an education system characterized by highly effective teachers who are empowered to profoundly impact generations of students. ●