

BUILDING EDUCATOR EXCELLENCE

# 25 YEARS OF IMPACT



**NIET**

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR  
EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

# Building Educator Excellence: 25 Years of Impact

For 25 years, the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching has partnered with schools, districts, states, and universities to strengthen educator quality and help ensure all students — no matter their background or circumstances — have the opportunity for success.

NIET's work has influenced outcomes for generations of students, shaped the careers of hundreds of thousands of teachers and school leaders, and helped encourage tremendous progress at schools and universities across the country. We are proud to have collaborated with more than 350,000 educators nationwide to act on our belief that intentional, sustained investments in teachers and the leadership that supports them are essential to eliminating equity gaps and providing a brighter future.

This report shares highlights from NIET's first 25 years and how our work is expanding, improving, and responding to new challenges. We hope you will enjoy reflecting along with us.

## OUR MISSION:

Building educator excellence to give all students the opportunity for success.

## OUR VISION:

Our vision is that every student in America is taught by an excellent teacher and supported by effective leaders every year. We believe intentional, sustained, and high-quality investments in educators directly result in success for all students and are essential to eliminating equity gaps. As a result, NIET is committed to raising achievement levels for all students by focusing on the most powerful lever for change — teachers and the leadership that supports them.



Osborn School District #8, Arizona

Twenty-five years ago, we started this work by recognizing, supporting, and investing in educators. Our vision: For students to grow and succeed, teachers need opportunities to grow and succeed. Elevating teachers into leadership roles is the strongest engine for accelerating teacher effectiveness — and thus student outcomes. Now, in 2025, we have never been more encouraged by the impact of teacher and school leaders working together to generate excellence in the classroom and support every student to reach their goals.





Winona Middle School, Winona Independent School District, Texas

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## Gadsden Elementary School District #32 | Arizona

Sitting along the U.S./ Mexico border, Gadsden Elementary School District #32's success is rooted in the district's intentional investments in teacher leadership. Gadsden's teacher leadership model has created a pipeline of local instructional leaders who are prepared to support their colleagues to meet students' academic and emotional development needs. Gadsden's educators and students have thrived as a result of the district's

investments in teacher leadership. Their development of a pipeline for educators with educational expertise has been so successful that six of their eight principals are former teacher leaders.

For example, Desert View Elementary School exemplifies the district's success in using teacher leadership to drive growth in both teacher effectiveness and student achievement. From 2021 to 2023, Desert View Elementary increased the percentage of

students passing the Arizona state assessment by 14 percentage points in English language arts and 30 percentage points in math. In 2023, the school also exceeded the state in the percentage of students passing the state assessment in both English language arts and math. These assessment results are mirrored in Desert View Elementary's "A" letter grade. ●



*A Desert View Elementary School teacher and student work together to solve a problem.*

“NIET’s systematic approach, including comprehensive support, can empower and elevate educators to new heights in their professional journeys. The teachers we have grown showcase the tangible and positive outcomes that result from the thoughtful implementation of NIET’s principles and support.”

**MEREDITH NELSON**

PRINCIPAL, DESERT VIEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

GADSDEN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT #32, ARIZONA



# 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.

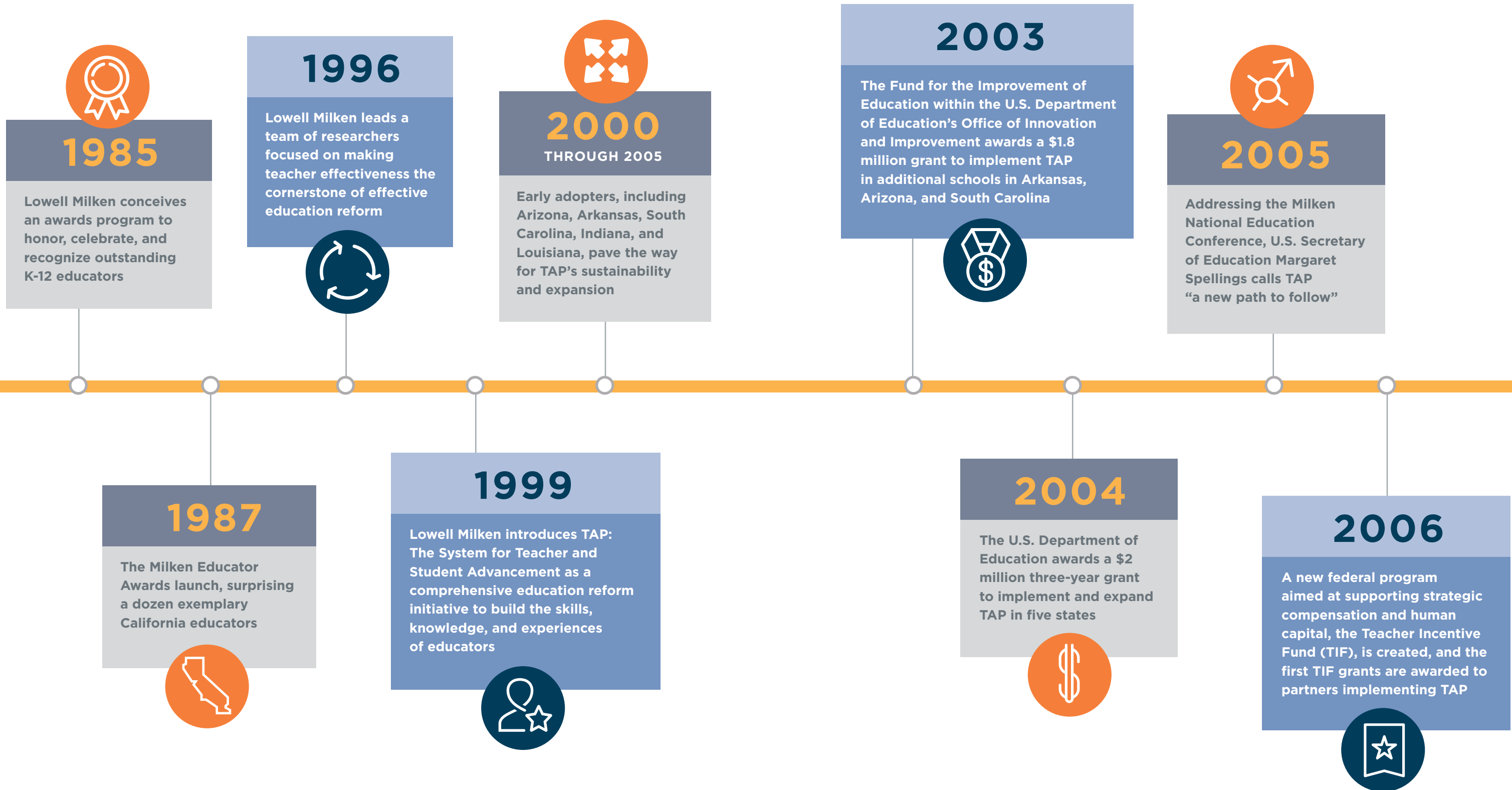
Educators are motivated because they are supported. Professional learning is directly tied to their needs and the needs of their students. Contrary to most professional development, this learning continues beyond the scheduled sessions, with teacher leaders visiting classrooms freely to co-teach, model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

actionable feedback. As teachers thrive, students achieve.

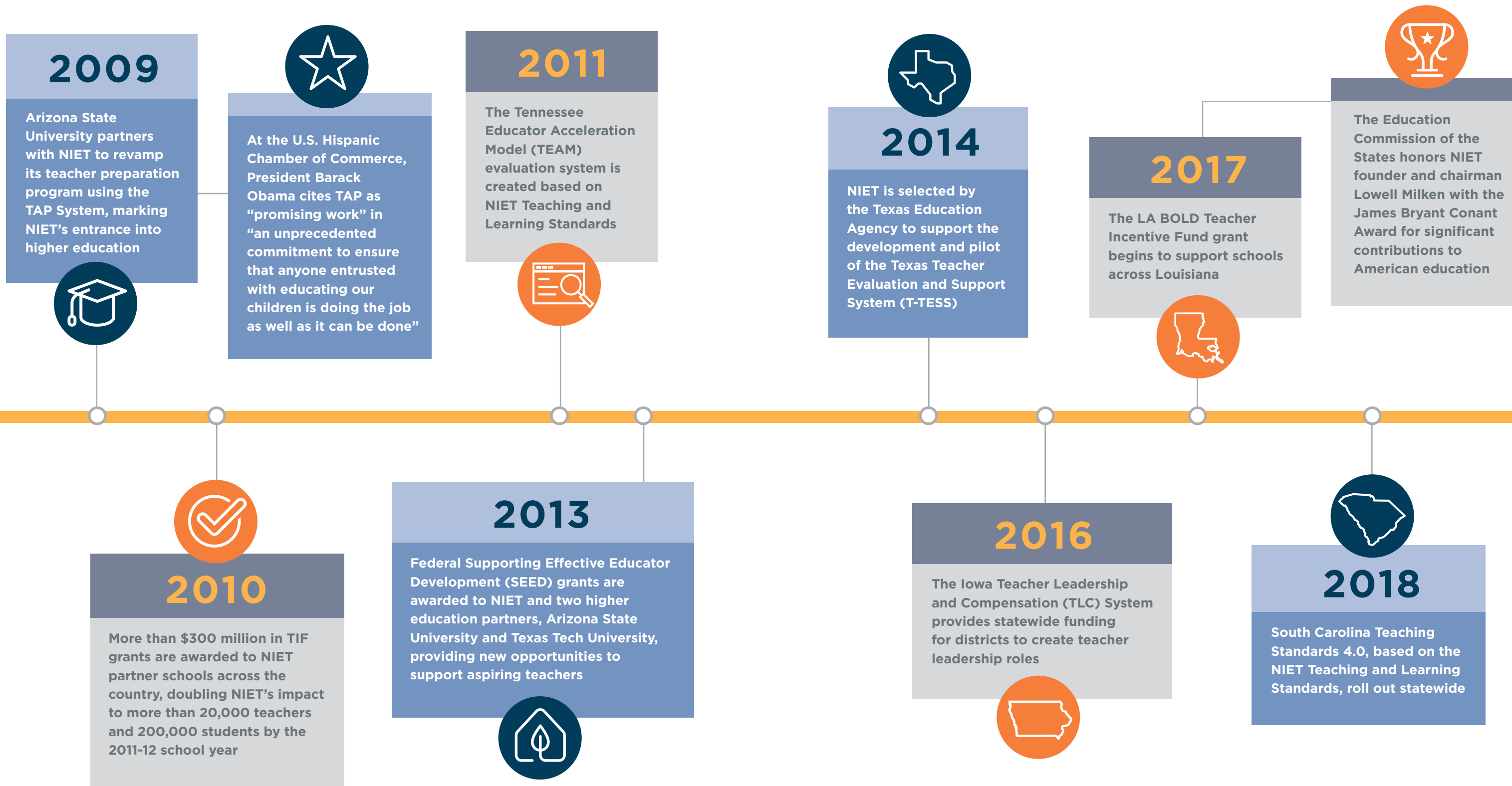
By establishing these structures, NIET partner schools have seen historic student achievement. In 2023, the National Bureau of Economic Research highlighted the impact of NIET’s TAP System in South Carolina on high school graduation rates, as well as longer-term socioeconomic measures. Researchers estimated 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. ●

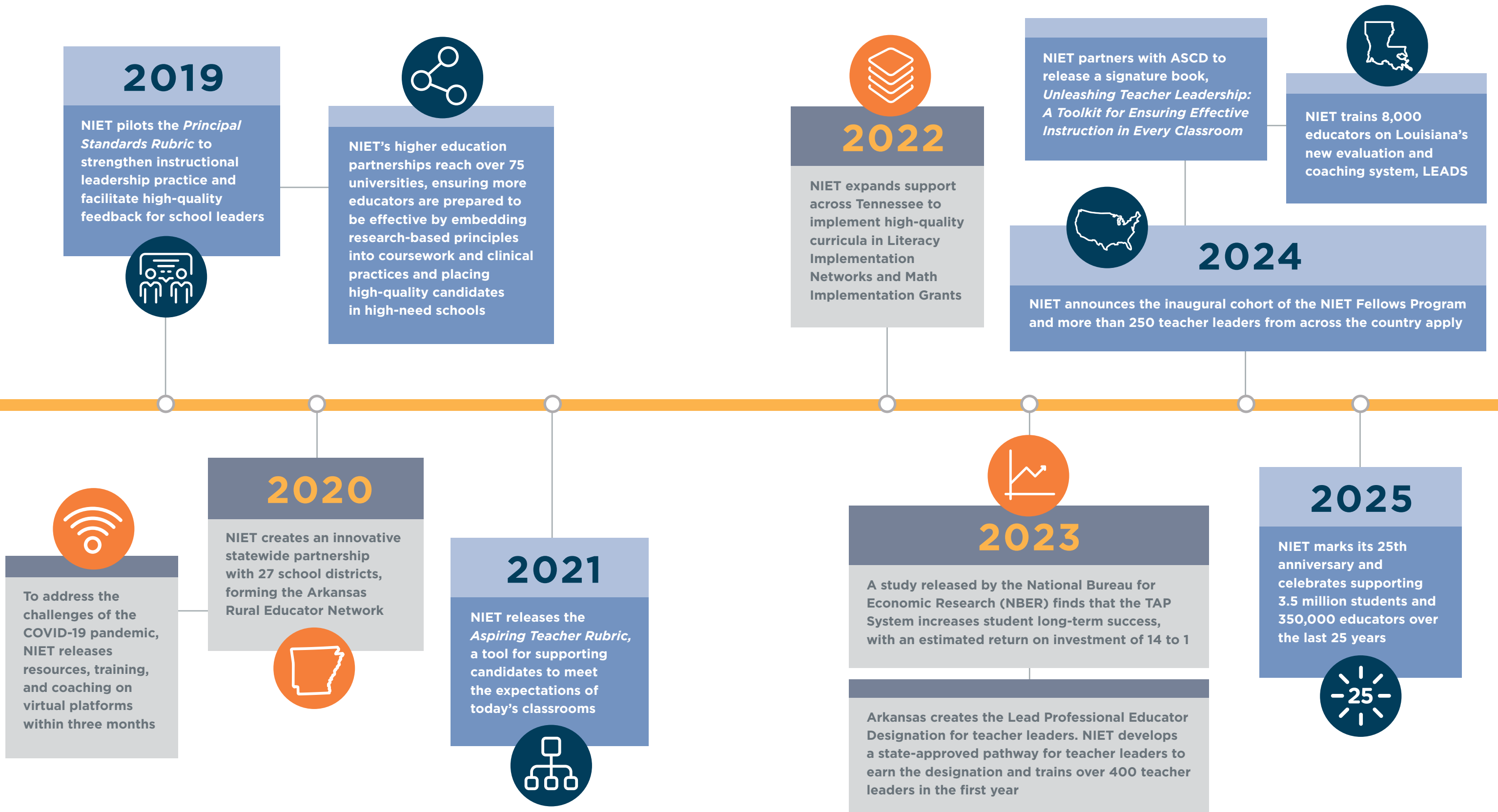














## FEATURE STORY

## 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

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

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.

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.



**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



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. ●



## PHOTO GALLERY

# Celebrating Award-Winning Partners

**W**e believe that great work and student achievement gains should be celebrated, and we are proud to recognize the progress and achievements of our partners through national awards. Our signature award, the Founder's Award, honors schools for exceptional implementation of NIET's principles to build educator excellence and advance student success. Each year, Founder's Award finalists are selected from NIET partners nationwide to receive \$10,000 each. The finalists are celebrated at the NIET National Conference, where the Founder's Award winner

is announced and receives a \$50,000 grand prize.

The success of a Founder's Award winner, however, does not happen overnight. NIET also celebrates Schools of Promise, an award that recognizes a school's continued efforts to strengthen instructional practices and support student success. These schools are awarded a \$5,000 prize and recognized as schools to watch.

Since 2018, NIET has also celebrated district-wide success with the District Award of Excellence for Educator

Effectiveness. This award — and its \$50,000 prize — honors school districts' achievements in supporting excellent instruction and improving student performance. Winning districts are recognized for investing in educators' professional growth, fostering teacher leadership, and increasing student success.

We are proud to feature our award-winning partners throughout this report. This photo gallery looks back at some of our finalists and winners over the years.

## HMONG COLLEGE PREPARATORY ACADEMY

**2017 FOUNDER'S AWARD FINALIST: HMONG COLLEGE PREPARATORY ACADEMY, MINNESOTA**

Educators at Hmong College Preparatory Academy increase student success by strengthening the alignment between instruction and student needs. Professional learning opportunities are provided for teachers to analyze student needs and learn instructional strategies that directly address them. This alignment has allowed teachers to differentiate instruction and support each student to accelerate their learning.



“NIET’s protocols have helped our leadership team develop a common expectation for student learning outcomes that unites us and allows us to offer superior support to our teachers and students.”

**DANIJELA DUVNJAK**  
**CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICER**  
*HMONG COLLEGE PREPARATORY ACADEMY, MINNESOTA*

## CLINTON CITY SCHOOLS

**2024 FOUNDER'S AWARD FINALIST: CLINTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, TENNESSEE**

Clinton Elementary School's leadership team puts student academic goals at the center of professional learning. The school has embedded high-impact professional learning into school schedules to create a cycle of continuous improvement through detailed, relevant, and actionable feedback on instruction. By focusing on individual teacher and student needs through data- and student-centered conversations, the school's efforts have led to increased student achievement.



“One of the biggest successes of our work with NIET is our structure for a collaborative learning environment in our professional learning communities. Prior to NIET, our professional learning meetings were driven by one objective instead of being driven by what data showed teachers and students needed. Through working with NIET, we now have a cyclical learning process that transfers learning from leaders to teachers and, ultimately, students.”

**JENNA SHARP**  
**PRINCIPAL**  
*CLINTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, TENNESSEE*



## OSBORN SCHOOL DISTRICT #8

2016 FOUNDER'S AWARD FINALIST:  
CLARENDON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL,  
ARIZONA

At Clarendon Elementary School, teachers and students analyze data to set goals, create action steps, and monitor progress. As part of professional learning communities, teachers collaborate with colleagues about what they see in their student data and what instructional strategies could take student learning to the next level. Osborn School District is expanding on Clarendon's successful approach in schools across the district.



"We have anchored our academic and student success goals around accelerating student learning while improving teacher effectiveness. Partnership with NIET enables us to continue to grow and improve."

**DR. MICHAEL ROBERT**  
SUPERINTENDENT  
OSBORN SCHOOL DISTRICT #8, ARIZONA

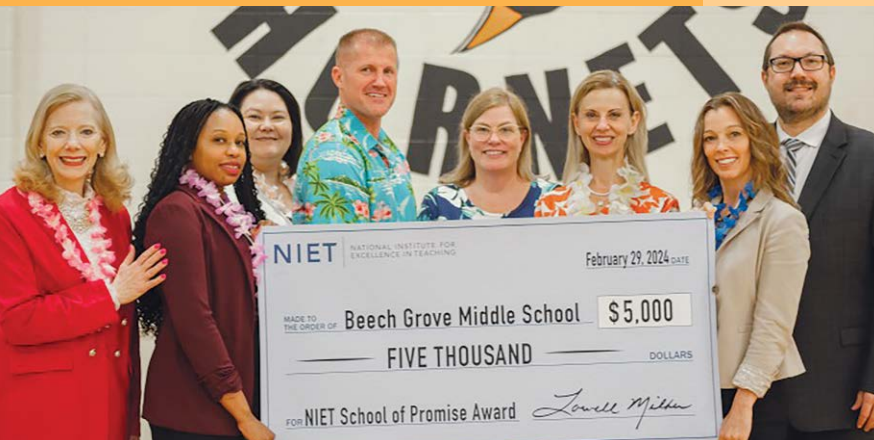
## JEFFERSON PARISH SCHOOLS

2023 SCHOOL OF PROMISE:  
WOODMERE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL,  
LOUISIANA

Woodmere Elementary School is part of Jefferson Parish Schools, the largest and most diverse district in Louisiana. The Woodmere leadership team's mission is to provide students with a high-quality education in a positive learning environment. School leaders and teachers advance this mission by implementing NIET professional learning and growth structures to create a strong school culture around a common language and goals. By creating a positive learning environment, Woodmere ensures that both students and teachers succeed.

"NIET has helped us build a culture of collaboration while leading us to become successful at growing our students academically, as well as strengthening teacher knowledge and instructional practices."

**GIVONNA HYMEL**  
PRINCIPAL  
WOODMERE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL,  
LOUISIANA



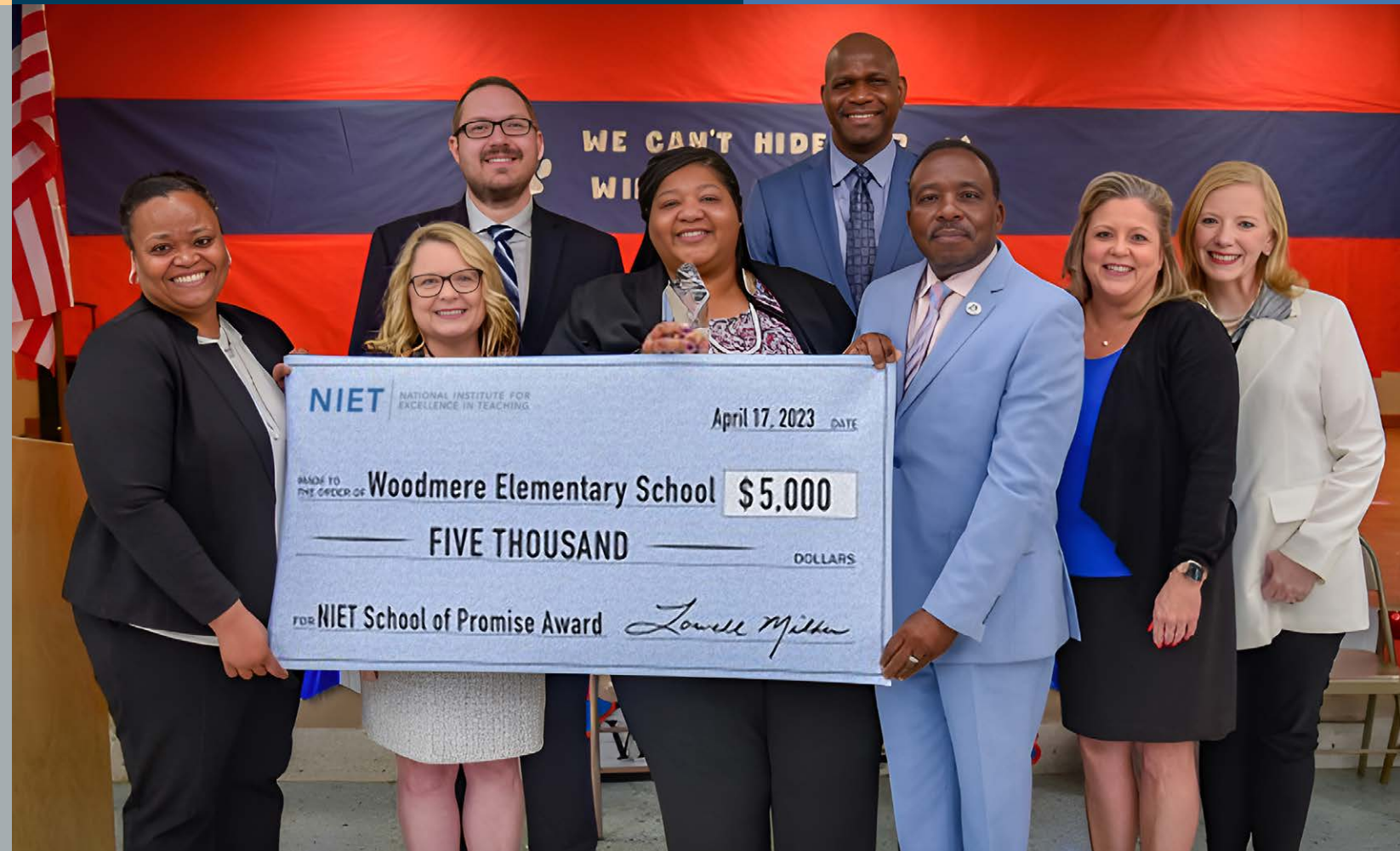
## BEECH GROVE CITY SCHOOLS

2024 SCHOOL OF PROMISE:  
BEECH GROVE MIDDLE SCHOOL,  
INDIANA

The Beech Grove Middle School leadership team ensures that every student receives high-quality instruction and that every educator receives individualized coaching and real-time support. The school partners with NIET to support this work through a system of teacher leadership and job-embedded professional learning that ensures teachers have the instructional strategies necessary to meet student needs. As a result, Beech Grove Middle School teachers continuously improve their instructional skills — resulting in increases in student achievement.

"Our commitment to doing what's best for our students has always guided us, and winning the 2024 School of Promise award serves as proof that our collaborative approach with NIET remains fruitful."

**RYAN MORGAN**  
PRINCIPAL  
BEECH GROVE MIDDLE SCHOOL, INDIANA





## AVONDALE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT

2024 DISTRICT AWARD OF EXCELLENCE FOR EDUCATOR EFFECTIVENESS: AVONDALE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT, ARIZONA

To create a common language for the coaching and support provided by teacher and school leaders, Avondale Elementary School District adopted the NIET *Teaching and Learning Standards Rubric*. The district's common instructional language means that across campuses, educators are supported to provide high-quality instruction for each student. Avondale's success exemplifies the impact of high-quality instructional practices and how investing in systems of support for excellent teaching can change a district's culture and student achievement.

"I know that our children can do absolutely anything they put their minds to — and that is our mission: to make sure they have that limitless future. There's no doubt in our minds that NIET is the foundation of our success."

**DR. BETSY HARGROVE**  
SUPERINTENDENT  
AVONDALE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT, ARIZONA



## PERRY TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS

2018 DISTRICT AWARD OF EXCELLENCE FOR EDUCATOR EFFECTIVENESS: PERRY TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS, INDIANA

Since 2010, NIET has partnered with Perry Township Schools to raise student achievement by putting teacher leaders at the forefront of school improvement. Teacher leaders facilitate collaborative professional learning tailored to the needs of teachers and students as reflected in data. The data is analyzed using an instructional rubric to uncover areas for coaching and feedback, creating a culture of continuous improvement.

"The framework that NIET brought to our district has been an absolute game-changer for us. It has helped us create a laser focus on what kids need and how we can use data to impact the work we do daily. In my career, and in our school district, the framework has made an amazing impact."

**BRIAN KNIGHT**  
DIRECTOR OF SECONDARY EDUCATION  
PERRY TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS, INDIANA



# Story of Success

SOMERSET INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT | SOMERSET, TEXAS



SSGT Michael P. Barrera Veterans Elementary School, Somerset Independent School District, Texas

Somerset Independent School District has worked to improve student academic outcomes by increasing equitable access to effective educators. Distributed leadership and teacher leadership opportunities have created a career pathway for teachers in Somerset, increasing retention and developing the instructional skills of all teachers and leaders in the district.

Somerset, located southwest of San Antonio, serves around 4,000 students, more than 80% of whom come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Somerset began partnering with NIET in the 2010-11 school year to implement the TAP System after the district had struggled for years to meet academic achievement goals, having been identified as “academically unacceptable” and “improvement required” under state accountability systems. The TAP System was attractive to Somerset as a way to address its challenge of recruiting and retaining effective teachers and principals while making strides in student achievement.

## SOMERSET’S STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Adopting the TAP System changed how Somerset approached classroom instruction and helped the district focus on equity. School leaders began asking themselves a key question: *How can we ensure that highly effective teaching is happening across all classrooms?*

With that question in mind, Somerset principals and teacher leaders help teachers strengthen equitable practices using data and student work. Somerset adopted NIET’s *Teaching and Learning Standards Rubric*, which provides clear descriptions of strategies that improve instruction and create a positive learning environment.





## Identify Individual Student Needs

Somerset teachers analyze student work to pinpoint areas of need for specific students that, when combined with analysis of student assessment data, create a detailed picture of student needs. Teachers use student data and student work to identify needs to address during classroom instruction, as well as possible areas for supplemental support. This approach helps teachers plan lessons that enable each student to access the learning in their classroom and to identify and plan targeted supplemental services such as tutoring.

## Plan Ahead to Create Opportunities for Equitable Access

Across multiple indicators of classroom practice, educators use the rubric to identify where equity can be advanced. They analyze student needs and anticipate where individuals or groups of students might struggle. Teachers are supported to use the rubric as a coaching tool, asking questions such as: *In planning a lesson, what activities and materials do you plan to use to engage different students with different needs?*

## Use Observation and Feedback to Coach Teachers to Build Equity into Their Lessons

Next, leaders visit classrooms to observe and provide feedback for individual teachers. Leaders consider what evidence would show them that a classroom lesson was providing each student with access to grade-level learning. Leaders consider the kinds of reflective questions to ask teachers, such as: *How will you plan your questioning to engage each student? How will you create a lesson that supports students with different needs, such as those who are English Language Learners?*

Identifying how to elevate equity is a critical step in Somerset's system to grow effective teachers who can support each student to be successful. "Student success is truly tied to the quality of the teacher within the classroom," said Somerset Elementary School Principal Nieves Carrales. "At Somerset, we spend a great deal of time focusing on growing teachers, building capacity, and making sure we have instructional leaders throughout our campus because we know that, in turn, student success falls in line."

The TAP System has helped the district develop and retain effective teachers, create more equitable teaching and learning opportunities, and make strides in student achievement.

### WHAT'S NEXT?

Since partnering with NIET, Somerset has seen growth in its teachers and students. In 2021, it was one of only nine districts out of the 1,200 in Texas to see academic growth during the pandemic. From 2021 to 2024, Somerset rose in the percentage of students passing state assessments in each tested subject. In 2024, Somerset also outperformed the state on the math and reading state assessments at each grade level.

Somerset is sustaining momentum and making ongoing progress. The district is committed to creating a supportive environment for students to excel and sets ambitious goals for all students. Notably, 95% of Somerset graduates were college-, career-, or military-ready in 2023. This represents a significant increase over the prior year and puts Somerset among the most successful districts in Texas in meeting this student success measure. ●



Somerset Independent School District students operate a drone during a hands-on STEM activity.

"Student success is truly tied to the quality of the teacher within the classroom. At Somerset, we spend a great deal of time focusing on growing teachers, building capacity, and making sure we have instructional leaders throughout our campus because we know that, in turn, student success falls in line."

**NIEVES CARRALES**  
PRINCIPAL  
SOMERSET ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, TEXAS



# In Conversation

PAT MAPES

Pat Mapes is a member of the Indiana State Board of Education and superintendent of Hamilton Southeastern Schools. He previously served as superintendent of Perry Township Schools, where he led the district to academic success through a focus on high-quality classroom instruction.



**What is it about the TAP System and NIET’s approach to building educator excellence that makes you want to help schools implement it?**

In my experience, NIET is a game-changer because of the way they elevate teachers into instructional leadership. Our focus is on growing students, but to do this, we need to grow teachers. Aligning our systems to help teachers grow and improve generates excellence in the classroom. It creates a continuous cycle of improvement as more teachers want to join a team that helps them to be the best teachers they can be. And this culture of growth builds a district-wide community of

learners. As a former classroom teacher and principal, I appreciate how TAP creates a shared language around great classroom teaching and aligns professional learning and classroom coaching to that shared vision.

**How have you seen the creation of teacher leadership roles impact educators?**

Over the years, I have seen the impact of creating teacher leadership roles — it brings teachers into instructional leadership of schools while at the same time creating a pipeline to grow our strongest teachers into leaders at the school and district levels. My experience is that teacher leadership roles are the foundation of a strong collaboration and feedback structure that attracts, grows, and retains effective educators. Teacher leaders are then in a prime position to take on administrative roles and bring with them a wealth of instructional knowledge and expertise. Helping every teacher to grow with this system of support leads to significant and sustained improvements in student outcomes.

**What makes NIET different from other partners?**

Indiana districts were among the earliest partners for NIET, and what we learned in our districts helped NIET to build and strengthen the practices, structures, and protocols for instructional excellence over the last 25 years. Most importantly, these partnerships helped teachers and students to make measurable improvements.

**What do you think NIET should focus on in our next 25 years?**

I hope NIET continues their focus on instructional practices as they move forward. I truly believe that in order to raise the profession of education, all teachers and administrators need to work together to identify best instructional practices and duplicate them in their schools. There still is nothing more important than having a great instructional teacher in front of students each and every day. NIET is great at partnering with schools and developing great instructional leaders and should keep up this important work. ●



## BOOKEND

# Winona Middle School

WINONA, TEXAS

Winona Middle School in Winona Independent School District has undergone a culture shift, from teachers working in silos to teachers collaborating in a professional learning community led by teacher leaders from within the school. Winona Middle School initially partnered with NIET on school improvement work and has continued to refine their use of best practices. These practices

include weekly professional learning meetings using the NIET *Five Steps for Effective Learning*, shared leadership through an instructional leadership team, and ongoing coaching and feedback for teachers.

Principal Johnny Walker and his leadership team have focused on building teachers’ instructional capacity, providing time for

collaboration and professional learning, and using data to identify needs — all while keeping student success at the forefront. As a result of their focus, Winona Middle School improved its state letter grade from an “F” in 2019 to a “B” in 2022. Based on student data, school leaders are seeing further growth in student achievement that reflects a continued positive trajectory. ●



## North DeSoto High School | Louisiana

**N**orth DeSoto High School in rural northwest Louisiana embodies DeSoto Parish Schools' commitment to excellent teaching and high expectations. Through its partnership with NIET, the school has increased teacher and leader effectiveness and made steady improvements in student achievement.

Under the guidance of an instructional leadership team (ILT), North DeSoto High School is committed to student growth and teacher growth. The ILT

comprises teacher leaders and school leaders who provide the necessary resources, support, and coaching for teachers to successfully implement high-quality instructional materials and practices. The support provided to teachers helps them to differentiate instruction and engage all students in grade-level learning. As a result of the ILT's work, the environment found at North DeSoto High School fosters continuous improvement. Between 2015 and 2023, the school has continuously earned an "A" rating from the Louisiana Department of

Education. In recent years, North DeSoto High School students have outperformed the state of Louisiana in the percentages of tests scoring "mastery and above" on state assessments in each tested subject. North DeSoto High School — and other campuses in DeSoto Parish Schools — elevate teaching and learning using NIET's tools and resources to support instructional excellence across all classrooms. ●

"One of my greatest concerns as a school system leader is ensuring equality across the district. Through our partnership with NIET, I have peace of mind in knowing that all of our children are being impacted in the same positive way across our system."

**CLAY CORLEY**  
SUPERINTENDENT  
DESOTO PARISH SCHOOLS, LOUISIANA

North DeSoto High School, DeSoto Parish Schools, Louisiana



# 25 Years of Achieving Results

BY DR. JOSHUA BARNETT, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING



**M**y journey with NIET began in 2005, when I was looking for a dissertation topic that examined my two main areas of interest: teacher quality and education finance. I heard about the TAP System as a new robust initiative that included career pathways, instructionally

focused accountability, job-embedded professional growth, and performance-based compensation. My professional journey led me to serve at the university level for the next eight years, but I was impacted by what I saw with the TAP System. In 2013, I joined NIET as director of research and evaluation to help

expand the mission to reach more educators and students. In the years since, I have experienced and seen firsthand the impact of NIET's work in schools across the nation. While there are a great many memorable moments, one of my favorite aspects of my work is visiting classrooms in NIET's partner

schools. These visits allow me to meet educators and, most importantly, to see and hear directly from the students we are impacting.

After talking about the day's lesson or how great their teacher is, I often ask: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" As you might expect, I hear a range of answers, from "veterinarian" or "astronaut" to even more ambitious ones, like "Spiderman" or "cake tester." However, one answer stands apart from the rest: *teacher*. Over the years, I have even heard this answer at my own dinner table, as two of my children have chosen to become teachers.

It is always inspiring to hear that students want to be teachers, especially when this decision is driven by their experiences with their own teachers. It reinforces NIET's belief that teachers are the most powerful lever for change. In our 25 years, NIET has worked in communities across the country to strengthen the teaching profession and make it a career that talented young people want to pursue.

The research-based practices at the core of our work — building the instructional practices of every teacher through collaborative professional learning teams and individual classroom coaching

— have many complementary benefits, including creating career opportunities for teachers and retaining effective teachers in subjects and regions that are difficult to staff.

NIET believes in the bold idea of empowering teachers as leaders while creating systems and structures at the school and district levels to support continuous improvement. We are proud to say that our work has proven highly effective in a wide range of school communities across 27 states and more than 1,000 districts, impacting more than 350,000 teachers and 3.5 million students. Furthermore, research shows that our work is having significant short- and long-term impacts. A statewide study released in 2023 by the National Bureau of Economic Research found the benefits of NIET's TAP System include increased high school graduation rates and improvements in longer-term economic and social measures — resulting in a remarkable 14-to-1 return on investment.

Over our 25-year history, NIET has pioneered innovative approaches and impressively taken those impactful practices to scale across highly diverse communities. Our ability to create the systems and structures that allow districts to scale and sustain improvement

has been a key differentiator. Working with our partners, we have piloted reforms in educator effectiveness that have led to policy changes at the national and state levels. We have been leaders in the development and use of federal funding sources for teacher leadership roles and new models for staffing schools that build instructional leadership capacity.

NIET's results stand out because of the decades-long track record of growth and success in working with our partners to raise student achievement in high-need schools. The results resoundingly and repeatedly demonstrate our impact on instructional improvement, educator efficacy, teacher retention, and student achievement — and we are as dedicated to excellence now as we were 25 years ago.

I am proud of the progress we have made and of our role in advancing the profession so that more students consider and choose "teacher" as a rewarding career. I look forward to the innovation and improvements that will happen in the next 25 years, and we are excited to be your partner in elevating teaching as a fulfilling and impactful career. ●



# Examining the Evidence: The TAP System Increases Student Success



Lake Marion High School, Orangeburg County School District, South Carolina

**G**rounded in a clear, evidence-based approach, we evaluate our work with partners to answer the most important question: *Does it have an impact?* Over the last two and a half decades, research studies have illustrated the power of the core strategies of the TAP System to strengthen educator practices and increase both student learning growth and retention of effective educators.

These practices start with organizing and supporting teams of teachers led by teacher leaders (master teachers and mentor teachers) and integrating teacher leaders into school-level systems, including the instructional leadership team. Effective teacher leaders then provide collaborative professional learning, individual classroom-based coaching, and observation and feedback.

## A HIGHLY COST-EFFECTIVE SYSTEM

In 2023, a groundbreaking independent study was released by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) demonstrating the multiyear impact of the TAP System across the state of South Carolina.

The NBER [study](#) found this comprehensive system of ongoing support and coaching led by

teacher leaders working with school leaders, combined with performance compensation for teachers, leads to improvements in student outcomes. “The Long Run Effects of a Comprehensive Teacher Performance Pay Program on Student Outcomes,” authored by Sarah Cohodes (University of Michigan), Ozkan Eren (University of California at Riverside), and Orgul Ozturk (University of South Carolina), studied South Carolina schools that implemented the TAP System with the support of federal Teacher Incentive Fund grants across multiple districts and multiple years. The study followed cohorts of eighth graders and found that the implementation of the TAP System had a significant impact on student academic achievement while creating longer-term benefits, including reduced reliance on social welfare programs and reduced arrest rates. The longer a student was exposed to the TAP System, the

greater the benefits. Researchers found the TAP System provided a 14-to-1 value for every dollar spent by the government: “Combining the benefits from reduced felony offenses and increased graduation results in an MVPF (marginal value of public funds) of 14, making TAP a very cost-effective program.”

## POSITIVE IMPACTS ON STUDENT LONG-TERM ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL OUTCOMES

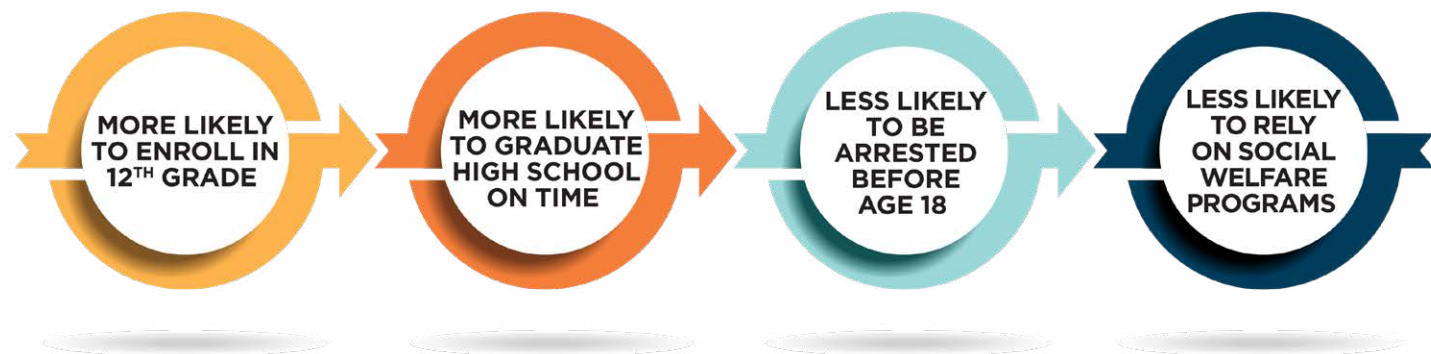
The NBER study authors found that eighth grade students exposed to the TAP System were three to four percentage points more likely to enroll in 12th grade and to graduate high school on time. Students exposed to the TAP System for a longer period in their middle school years also saw a greater effect. For example, the increased probability of 12th grade enrollment almost

# \$14:1

TAP System  
return on  
investment



THE STUDY FOUND THAT EIGHTH GRADE STUDENTS IN TAP SYSTEM SCHOOLS WERE:



quadrupled, from an increase of 2.1 percentage points after one year of exposure to an increase of 7.7 percentage points after four years of exposure.

In addition to student academic impacts, researchers found longer-term social and economic impacts. Students in TAP System schools were less likely to be arrested for a felony offense before the age of 18. The TAP System also decreased students' likelihood of relying on social welfare programs in early adulthood.

The results from this working paper reinforce that the TAP System is a cost-effective strategy for improving short- and long-term outcomes for students — and is increasingly effective over time.

**SUSTAINED IMPROVEMENTS IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

In 2024, another research study highlighting the impact of the

TAP System was published in the *Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, released by AASA, the School Superintendents Association. "Staying Power: English Language Arts Achievement After Installation of an Educator Effectiveness System" highlights the effectiveness of the TAP System beyond its initial implementation phase, showing significant and sustained improvements in student achievement.

The [study](#) followed 13 Indiana schools using the TAP System for seven years — a total of four years through a federal Teacher Incentive Fund grant and three additional years as the schools continued implementation after the grant concluded. The authors compared English Language Arts performances in these TAP System schools to those of schools that were similar in terms of student demographics and performance. Results showed that in each of the three years following the initial grant

implementation, the TAP System schools consistently outperformed the comparison schools.

**25 Years of Impact Across School Settings**

These studies build on findings from other research over the last two and a half decades, demonstrating the impact of NIET's strategic staffing structures and comprehensive systems of support. Research shows that NIET's support helps partners increase teacher effectiveness and retention, grow the instructional leadership skills of school leaders, and increase student learning growth. Positive results have been seen across a diverse range of communities and K-12 school settings, including urban, suburban, rural, tribal, public, and charter schools.

Building human capital within schools to implement data-driven



Orangeburg County School District, South Carolina

improvement processes leads to shifts in school culture, changes in beliefs and attitudes, and progress in student achievement. Our focus on changing schools begins with school leaders and teachers. We meticulously track our efforts for fidelity of implementation and feedback loops from educators, as well as the summative impact on instructional change and student achievement. The data-driven core elements of school improvement ensure our work continues to make an impact. We are proud of that growth and progress and look forward to sharing the results from the next 25 years. ●

“The TAP System offers sustainable benefits for schools, with evidence showing significant and lasting improvements in student achievement even after grant funding ends, making it a valuable investment for policymakers and educators alike.”

“Staying Power: English Language Arts Achievement After Installation of an Educator Effectiveness System,” AASA’s *Journal of Scholarship and Practice*



## 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

## 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*

## 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.



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.



PHOTO GALLERY

# Teacher Leadership Creates Career Pathways

Teacher leadership provides teachers with the chance to make an impact outside their classroom and build their instructional leadership skills. Success as a teacher leader opens up pathways to other leadership roles at the school, district, and state levels — bringing their instructional expertise into multiple layers of decision-making.

## JUAN DOMINGUEZ

MASTER TEACHER  
SOMERSET INDEPENDENT  
SCHOOL DISTRICT, TEXAS

Juan Dominguez entered the education field with an alternative certificate and led his first classroom as a substitute teacher. His commitments to bilingual education and developing his instructional skills have pushed him to be a fifth grade teacher, bilingual lead teacher, and mentor teacher in Somerset Independent School District. Now a master teacher at SSGT Michael P. Barrera Veterans Elementary, Juan uses his data-driven mindset to create positive learning environments for students and teachers to grow.



“Never stop believing in your students. Never stop believing in yourself. Come into this field and come into your classroom thinking, ‘I am the best teacher and I have the best students in my class.’”

JUAN DOMINGUEZ



## DR. JENNA CHIASSON

DEPUTY SUPERINTENDENT  
OF TEACHING AND LEARNING  
LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT  
OF EDUCATION

Dr. Jenna Chiasson has served in a variety of education roles, from starting her career as a high school English teacher to serving as a reading interventionist, Advanced Placement coordinator, and mentor teacher in a school implementing the TAP System. Dr. Chiasson moved further along the career pathway to district administration in St. John the Baptist Parish Public Schools and Jefferson Parish Schools before taking a role at the Louisiana Department of Education. Across these roles, she has led the district-wide adoption of high-quality curricula and implemented sustainable models of teacher-led professional learning.

“I learned about TAP over a decade ago, when I was hired as a TAP mentor teacher. Being a teacher leader was a wonderful experience to begin to learn and grow. It was a great first step for me outside of the classroom, to begin coaching other teachers. From my career, it is clear that NIET’s structures and practices to grow people translate from the state level all the way to the classroom level.”

DR. JENNA CHIASSON





**KEISHA NETTERVILLE**  
**SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS**  
**EAST FELICIANA PUBLIC SCHOOLS,**  
**LOUISIANA**

Keisha Netterville has grown from a career teacher into a master teacher, principal, and superintendent of schools for East Feliciana Public Schools, with support from NIET and fellow teacher leaders the whole way through. Critically, she learned how to use data to streamline professional learning, school goals, and district goals so every action is done with intention.

“The support from NIET helped me to not only have purpose but also confidence as I met with and supported my colleagues instructionally. Now, as a superintendent of schools, my vision for teaching and learning couldn’t be clearer. Our transparency allows us to eliminate the fluff and focus on what school leaders, teachers, and students need most.”

**KEISHA NETTERVILLE**

**AIMEE SCHADE**

**PRINCIPAL**  
**GOSHEN COMMUNITY SCHOOLS,**  
**INDIANA**

Aimee Schade has spent her career supporting the students and teachers of Goshen Community Schools to reach their full potential. She joined the district as an elementary school teacher before district leaders identified her potential as a teacher leader. She served as a mentor and master teacher at West Goshen Elementary School before taking over as principal. Aimee’s experience as a teacher leader helped her build instructional leadership skills and knowledge for success as a principal.

“NIET has provided us the chance to start leaning on people and asking career teachers to be leaders. I feel personally obligated to do that too because someone did that for me. As a leader, it is your job to be selfless and go tap on other people’s shoulders and say, ‘It is time.’”

**AIMEE SCHADE**







**ALEXIS AGUIRRE**  
**CURRICULUM SPECIALIST FOR**  
**DUAL LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**  
**AND BILITERACY**  
**OSBORN SCHOOL DISTRICT #8,**  
**ARIZONA**

Alexis Aguirre’s passion for education began after her teachers changed the trajectory of her life as a child in foster care. She became a librarian before becoming a second grade Spanish teacher in the dual language program at Phoenix’s Encanto Elementary School. Alexis went on to become a master teacher and now works in district administration as a curriculum specialist for dual language acquisition and biliteracy. In this role, the instructional expertise she gathered as a teacher leader allows her to support teachers to reach and grow all students.

“With NIET’s structures, I know that every walk-through, every observation, and every professional learning meeting is going to result in something that our teachers can immediately use in their classroom. Whether an educator is in their first year or their 20th year, we all have room to grow. As an instructional leader, that is what I get to help with. I am here to help teachers grow.”

**ALEXIS AGUIRRE**

# Story of Success

ASCENSION PUBLIC SCHOOLS | DONALDSVILLE, LOUISIANA

Ascension Public Schools began its partnership with NIET over a decade ago to implement the TAP System, a comprehensive approach to improving instruction and providing opportunities for teachers to grow as leaders. The district has since grown to become one of the top-performing school districts in the state of Louisiana.

Ascension, located southeast of Baton Rouge, serves more than 24,000 students across 31 schools. The school district is physically divided by the Mississippi River, which separates the parish’s more affluent and more economically disadvantaged communities. To bridge this divide, Ascension leaders have created a strong district culture in partnership with NIET.

## ASCENSION’S STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Ascension worked to close equity gaps while supporting academic growth for all students. The district focused additional resources on improving instruction in its highest-need schools and built a common language for strong instruction in every classroom.

## Improve Instruction in High-Need Schools and Classrooms

Ascension leaders partnered with NIET to provide an intensive level of support in schools that the state had identified as needing improvement. Schools designated as part of a “turnaround zone” implemented the TAP System’s core strategies of training teacher

leaders and school administrators to strengthen instructional support for classroom teachers through school-based professional learning and coaching. Success in the initial schools led district leaders to expand the TAP System across the district’s highest-need schools over the next several years, eventually bringing the most effective practices to all schools.







## Build a Common Language for Instruction

The district's highest-need schools struggled to provide high-quality rigorous instruction, particularly when students were several grade levels behind. There was no common understanding of what quality instruction should look and sound like.

To remedy this, the district adopted NIET's research-based description of strong teaching practices, creating a common language and expectations for instruction. The common language and expectations for instruction have supported the use of high-quality instructional materials in recent years. During weekly professional learning and individual coaching, teacher leaders help teachers implement high-quality instructional materials

and build their understanding of what strong instruction looks and sounds like in the classroom.

### WHAT'S NEXT?

Ascension's efforts have led to impressive results, as students have access to high-quality instruction regardless of where they live in the parish. For the past three years, Ascension was recognized by the state as one of the top 10 districts based on state assessment results. The graduation rate for Ascension grew from 89% in 2018-19 to 91% in 2022-23.

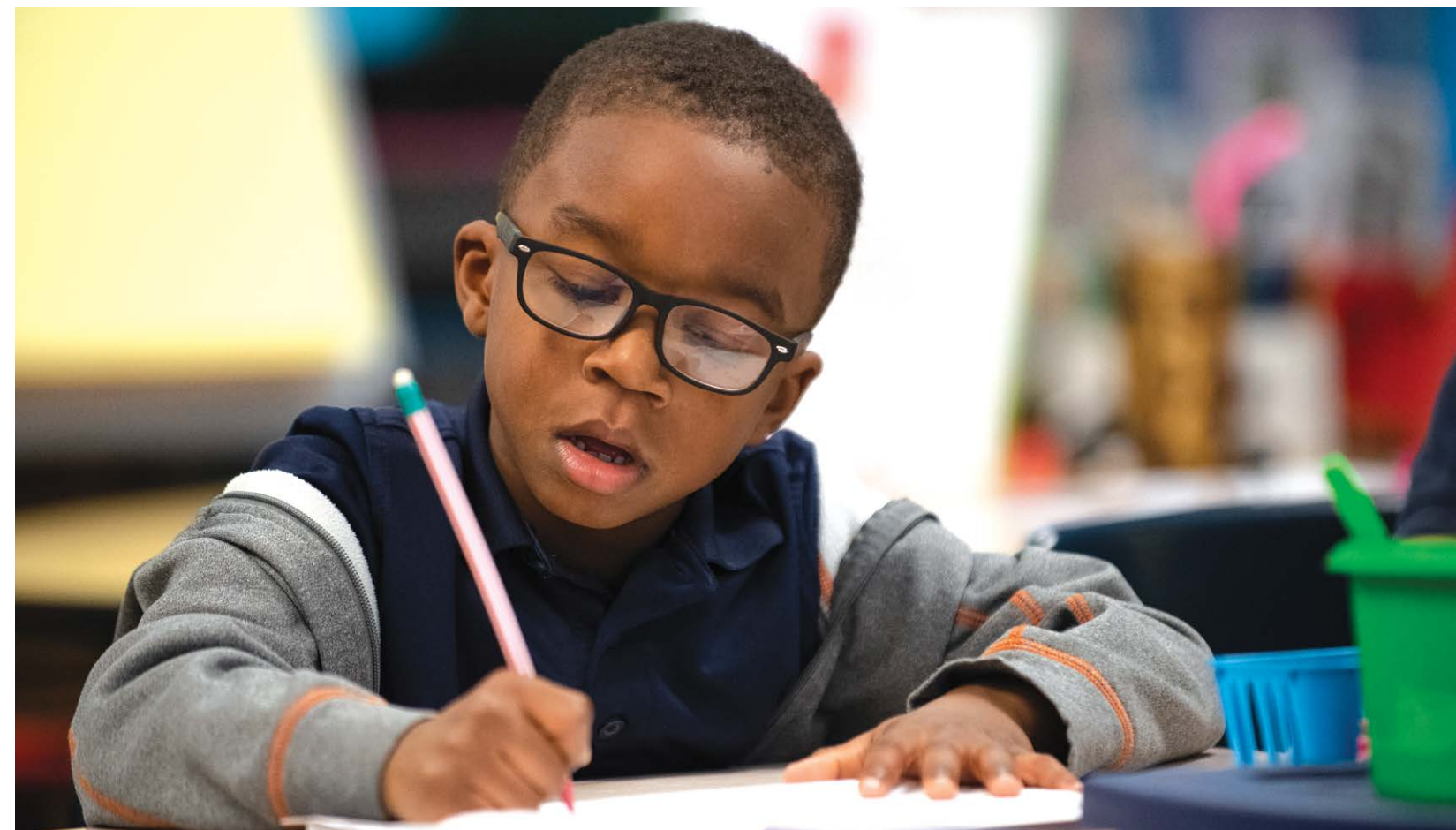
In 2022-23, Ascension ranked first in the state for the percentage of students scoring mastery and advanced on LEAP for third through 12th grades. Ascension achieved this distinction again in 2023-24, with 53% of students in grades three through 12 reaching mastery and advanced levels. Also in the 2023-24 school year, the district earned top rankings based on performance for students with disabilities, Black students, and economically disadvantaged students. Even as students continue to grow and the district earns top rankings, leaders and educators believe that the best is yet to come in Ascension. ●

## Homegrown Leaders Make a Difference

Ascension's distributed leadership approach has created a career pipeline for teachers to become strong instructional leaders and move into administrative roles in the district. Dr. Edith Walker is in her second year as superintendent after moving up through a variety of positions in Ascension, including serving as an instructional supervisor.

Before her district role, Dr. Walker was associate principal and principal at Dutchtown High School, where she led growth in overall school performance scores and consistently achieved an "A" rating. Dr. Walker began her career as an English teacher before serving as a counselor — all in Ascension.

Dr. Walker's instructional expertise is matched by a deep commitment to excellence for all students. Her experience in the district and her expertise as an instructional leader help her play an essential role in creating a common vision for supporting high-need schools.





# In Conversation

DR. MIKE HERNANDEZ

Dr. Mike Hernandez is the executive director of the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators, a statewide organization that offers networking and professional learning opportunities to school district leaders.



on school leadership teams to strengthen professional learning and classroom coaching. The relationships forged by that network endured, and the focus on teacher leadership is reflected in recent statewide initiatives to recognize and engage teacher leaders in improving teaching and learning.

**In what ways has NIET contributed to building the skills and knowledge of your members?**

My organization provides a year of intensive support to new superintendents to help them master the many aspects of the role and to create a foundation for growth and success. We partner with NIET to offer superintendents an opportunity to continue to grow and improve through two additional years of coaching. Every leader benefits from coaching, and it is especially valuable for rural leaders, who have fewer opportunities for collaboration and professional learning. NIET's one-on-one support is helping superintendents build instructional leadership capacity among their own teams. One of the most

important things NIET brings to the table is a commitment to growth and improvement.

**What should NIET focus on in our next 25 years?**

The vision of NIET has never been more relevant than right now. Across our state, we need to continue efforts to ensure that every student is taught by an exceptional teacher and that those teachers have the support of a quality leader. NIET should double down on its efforts to support teachers and leaders due to rising turnover in the education ranks. I have seen firsthand the diligent work that NIET has done to help educators in our state and would hope that they stay the course for years to come. ●

**How has NIET played a role in strengthening education in your state?**

My involvement with NIET started through the Arkansas Rural Educator Network, an initiative helping rural school and district leaders respond to the challenges of the pandemic and post-pandemic period. NIET provided leaders with research-based, practical strategies for improving classroom instruction across their buildings and districts. Through the network, NIET created a forum for rural leaders to connect and collaborate around their biggest challenges. Several of the districts achieved strong results by including teacher leaders



BOOKEND

## Desert Thunder School

GOODYEAR, ARIZONA

In recent years, the student population at Desert Thunder School in the Avondale Elementary School District has grown in number and diversity, requiring teachers to strengthen their ability to differentiate instruction while continuing to set high expectations. A commitment to the best practices and structures of NIET has allowed the school to meet the needs of

all students. Specifically, Desert Thunder School has focused on building the capacity of teachers through dedicated time for collaboration and school-based professional learning, strengthening the use of high-quality instructional practices, and creating a positive learning environment for teachers and students alike.

With its implementation of NIET structures, Desert Thunder School has earned an "A" rating for several years under Arizona's school letter grade system — most recently in 2024. With the campus's positive learning environment, Desert Thunder School students have outperformed students statewide on state assessments. ●



# Unleashing Teacher Leadership: A Toolkit for Ensuring Effective Instruction in Every Classroom

In 2024, NIET released a culminating work: *Unleashing Teacher Leadership: A Toolkit for Ensuring Effective Instruction in Every Classroom*. Published in partnership with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), *Unleashing Teacher Leadership* quickly became a favorite read of educators looking to strengthen their instructional leadership skills.

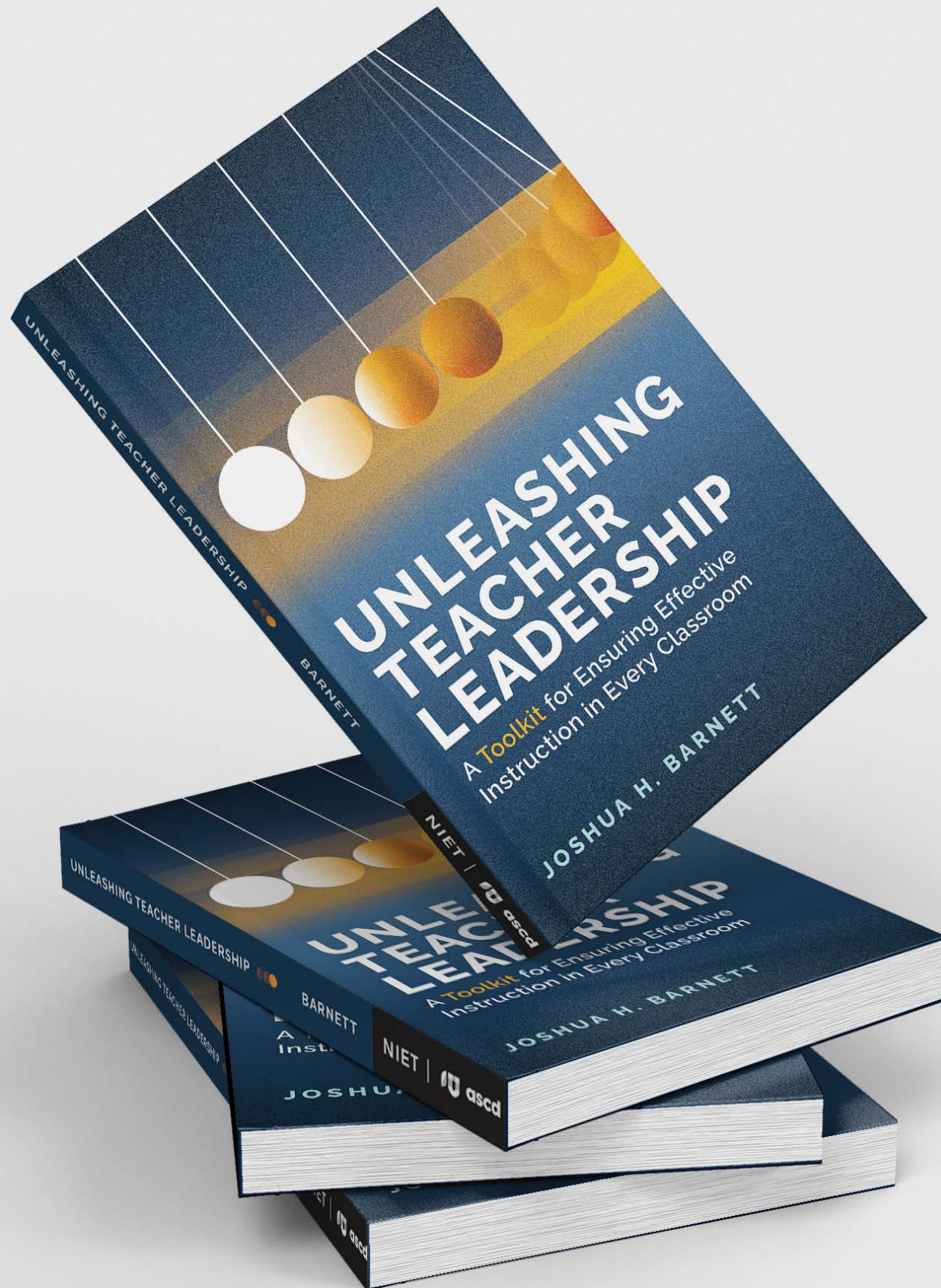
The book examines best practices and tools that teacher leaders can use to unlock their power and drive lasting instructional improvement across schools and districts. Along with guidance on these best practices, readers get the perspectives of teacher leaders engaged in this work and acquire dozens of NIET-developed tools they can use to unleash the power of effective teacher

leadership in their schools and districts.

Across the country, *Unleashing Teacher Leadership* has proven to be a valuable resource for teachers and leaders. It is used to plan instructional leadership team meetings, to guide professional learning for teachers, and as a tool for individual coaching. ●

“In Tennessee, we have tapped into the power of teacher leadership to support student success. Our work to advance literacy and math, in many districts, is fueled by teacher leaders. NIET’s book shares practical advice on how teacher leaders can improve teaching and learning across a building and a district. It is a welcome addition and will inform conversations about school improvement and student learning.”

**DR. SARA HEYBURN MORRISON**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
TENNESSEE STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION





# Improving Instruction to Promote Equity

BY DR. JAMES GRAY, SUPERINTENDENT OF JEFFERSON PARISH SCHOOLS, HARVEY, LOUISIANA

Jefferson Parish Schools, situated just outside New Orleans, is the largest school system in Louisiana. We serve approximately 47,000 students across 74 schools, with a wonderfully diverse student body representing almost 50 different languages. At Jefferson Parish Schools, our mission is simple yet profound: Every student deserves to succeed in life. Providing the quality education necessary for all students to thrive is our commitment.

Many of our students face barriers to learning, and addressing those barriers has become a core part

of our work. In our effort to support every student, we have always recognized that equitable access to high-quality instruction is critical. One of the key shifts we made many years ago was to ensure we had high-quality instructional materials in place to support this level of instruction. As part of this commitment, we ensured the same instructional materials were used across our district. This guarantees that every student, regardless of background or school, has access to the same opportunities for success.

In particular, as part of our continuous learning process,

we stepped back and identified our math curriculum as an area needing improvement. A strong math curriculum not only builds academic knowledge but also empowers students with critical thinking skills — skills that are especially vital for those who face the greatest challenges. We value teaching the “what” of math — like  $2 \times 2 = 4$  — and we also value the “why” behind it. Now, our focus shifts even more to helping students understand the underlying concepts, allowing our students to apply mathematical thinking to even broader areas of their lives.

We have always understood that only having high-quality instructional materials is not enough to drive real change. Teachers and school leaders play a pivotal role in how well students engage with and benefit from the curriculum. To fully support our educators in implementing this new math curriculum with intention, we entered into a partnership with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching.

Through our partnership with NIET, we have been able to continue strengthening equitable learning opportunities across our district. NIET specialists work

closely with our district leaders, principals, and teacher leaders, offering them dedicated time and resources to unpack the curriculum, explore classroom strategies, and ensure that high-quality instruction is happening daily. With the support of NIET’s structures, such as instructional leadership teams and clusters, as well as NIET’s frameworks, such as the *Five Steps for Effective Learning*, our school leaders now have a clear path for guiding their teachers in delivering high-quality math instruction.

Our collaboration with NIET has created a ripple effect across our district. Principals and teacher leaders not only understand the curriculum at a deeper level, but they also serve as instructional coaches, helping classroom teachers refine their practice. This type of instructional leadership ensures that every student benefits from a strong, intentional implementation of the curriculum, making it a truly equitable endeavor.

As we look ahead, our partnership with NIET will continue to be instrumental in improving student outcomes. By fostering a community of educators who are curriculum and instruction experts, we are creating an environment where every student in Jefferson Parish has the opportunity to thrive. We are committed to continuing this journey and ensuring that our district remains a place where equity and excellence go hand in hand. ●





# By the Numbers

# 25 YEARS OF A NATIONWIDE SYSTEM OF SUPPORT

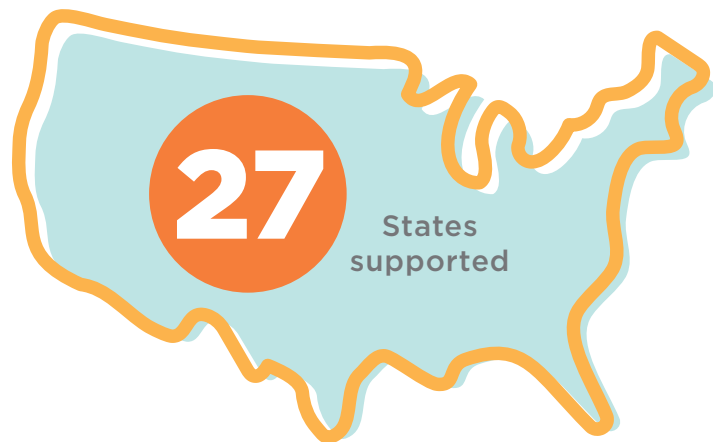


# 11,000

School partners

# 1,000

Districts impacted



# 27

States supported

# 35,000

Teacher leaders trained

# 475

TAP schools

# 105

College and university partners

# 350,000

Educators impacted



# 12,000

School leaders trained

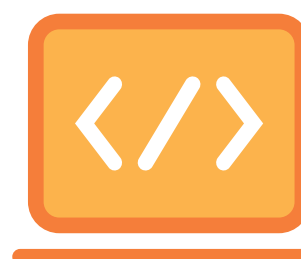


# 12,000

Aspiring teachers supported

# 24

National conferences held



# 623

Videos in EE PASS\*

# 3.5M

Students impacted

# \$14:1

TAP System return on investment\*\*



# 1,373

Resources in EE PASS\*

\*in 2024 \*\*www.nber.org/papers/w31056



# FEATURE STORY

## 25 Years, 25 Ways to Improve

NIET has been leading efforts to improve instruction and equip both teachers and students for a quarter-century now, and while there are no shortcuts to success, we share guidance and reminders to help teachers and leaders from states, districts, schools, and universities keep their compasses pointed north.



Louisiana educators meet to review high-quality instructional materials.



Desert View Elementary School,  
Gadsden Elementary School  
District #32, Arizona

### 5 WAYS TO ADVANCE VISIONARY STATE LEADERSHIP

1

**ADVANCE THE USE OF STRATEGIC STAFFING TO GIVE EVERY STUDENT THE OPPORTUNITY FOR SUCCESS** by creating formal teacher leadership roles, defining teacher leadership standards, and supporting the development of educator career pathways.

2

**BUILD A COMMON LANGUAGE AND SET EXPECTATIONS FOR STRONG TEACHING** by supporting the adoption of proven, research-based instructional frameworks and high-quality instructional materials.

3

**ELEVATE THE PROFESSION BY RECOGNIZING AND REWARDING SCHOOLS AND EDUCATORS** who are making the greatest gains, then share their practices statewide.

4

**STRENGTHEN MENTORING AND INDUCTION PROGRAMS** by promoting the intentional selection and training of mentors and integrating mentoring into professional learning systems.

5

**DEVELOP INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP TEAMS** at the district and school levels by offering training and support on the use of effective protocols, tools, and resources.



## 5 WAYS TO DRIVE DISTRICT-WIDE SUCCESS

6

**BUILD A DISTRICT-WIDE VISION FOR SUPPORTING THE SUCCESS OF EVERY STUDENT** using high-quality instructional materials and evidence-based practices that close learning gaps for historically marginalized students.

7

**IMPROVE SYSTEMS FOR EDUCATOR OBSERVATION, EVALUATION, AND COACHING** to support growth and raise the level of instructional excellence across classrooms and buildings.

8

**ADOPT LEADERSHIP STANDARDS AND STRATEGIES** to grow principals as instructional leaders, helping them to communicate goals and priorities, monitor progress, celebrate successes, make strategic adjustments, and support collective ownership of objectives.

9

**DEDICATE DISTRICT INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF TO CREATE SIGNIFICANT SUPPORT FOR PRINCIPALS AND SCHOOLS.** Dissolving silos and redefining instructional roles at the district office will create the opportunity to increase coaching for school leaders to improve instruction, accelerate learning, and eliminate equity gaps.

10

**UTILIZE RESOURCES AND TALENT TO SUPPORT THE HIGHEST-NEED SCHOOLS** and to fund the instructional vision, priorities, and support systems necessary for all schools to improve teaching and learning.



Henry Burkhart Elementary School, Perry Township Schools, Indiana

## 5 WAYS TO EMPOWER PRINCIPALS AS LEAD LEARNERS

11

**ESTABLISH GREAT CLASSROOM TEACHING AS THE CENTERPIECE OF EVERY SCHOOL.** Focusing on the most important work of schools — great teaching and learning — is the most direct path to giving all students the best opportunity for success. School leaders communicate a vision for supporting all students to access grade-level learning through high-quality instructional materials and practices.

12

**“GO FIRST” AND MODEL BEING A LEAD LEARNER.** School leaders can demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement and growth by spending time in classrooms to identify challenges and grounding their coaching and feedback in the curriculum.

13

**CREATE TIME, STRUCTURES, AND FORMAL ROLES FOR ONGOING, SCHOOL-BASED COLLABORATIVE LEARNING** that helps teachers understand the connection between their instructional practice and student outcomes. Engaging teacher leaders in planning and facilitating professional learning provides new opportunities for collaboration and coaching.





Winona Middle School, Winona Independent School District, Texas

14

**DEVELOP TEACHER LEADER ROLES DESIGNED TO SYSTEMATICALLY AND RELIABLY IMPROVE TEACHING AND ACCELERATE STUDENT LEARNING.**

Teacher leaders should have significant responsibility for leading collaborative learning teams, conducting observations to provide actionable feedback to teachers, modeling effective instructional practice in classrooms, and engaging in classroom-based coaching.

15

**INVEST IN BUILDING THE TALENT PIPELINE** by strengthening partnerships with educator preparation programs and creating support structures for new teachers from a diversity of preparation pathways.

**5 WAYS TO EQUIP TEACHERS AND TEACHER LEADERS FOR EXCELLENCE**

16

**CULTIVATE A GROWTH MINDSET AND CHOOSE TO TEACH STUDENTS WITH THE GREATEST NEEDS.** Recognizing and celebrating each student's learning and how it is building toward success will foster stronger relationships and school communities.

17

**BE INNOVATIVE AND USE DATA TO DRIVE INSTRUCTION.** Reflecting on instructional practices and student outcomes creates an example for students of how to understand and learn from their own data and work.

18

**ASSESS THE NEEDS AND STRENGTHS OF EACH STUDENT AND LET THOSE DRIVE EFFORTS.** Research-based practices and strategies are most effective when implemented in ways that address the unique needs of students and capitalize on the strengths of the community.

19

**ENGAGE OTHER EDUCATORS, PARENTS, AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS** in the work of improving teaching and learning, building on community values and resources, and supporting student success.

20

**TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN THE SCHOOL AND DISTRICT.** Research and experience have shown that leadership is not a zero-sum quantity in schools. Taking on a leadership role enhances, rather than limits, opportunities for other teachers to engage in leadership.





## 5 WAYS TO BUILD THE NEXT GENERATION OF EDUCATORS

21

**BUILD NEW TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF EXCELLENT INSTRUCTION** by using a research-based instructional framework or rubric in coursework and student teaching practice.

22

**PARTNER WITH SCHOOL DISTRICTS TO STRENGTHEN SUPPORT FOR NEW TEACHERS** through collaborative learning and coaching. By working in partnership with districts, educator preparation programs can better prepare new teachers to meet the needs of students and contribute the expertise of program leaders to school districts.

23

**PREPARE TEACHERS FOR LEADERSHIP ROLES FOCUSED ON INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT.** Teacher leadership requires new skills and knowledge. Schools of education can train teacher leaders in areas such as leading collaborative teams, observing classroom lessons and sharing feedback, and providing individualized coaching.

24

**TRAIN NEW PRINCIPALS TO BE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS** and to manage instructional leadership teams. Use research-based leadership standards to define effective practices, meet the needs of diverse learners, engage teacher leaders, and provide clear priorities for principals' instructional leadership.

25

**RESEARCH THE MOST IMPACTFUL PRACTICES IN INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP.** District and school leaders are looking for information on the effectiveness of models, practices, or strategies, and universities play an important role in identifying what works for specific groups of students and teachers. ●

## PHOTO GALLERY NIET Reaches the Last Frontier

NIET's work is not limited to the Lower 48. Our mission has made it all the way to the Last Frontier. While school settings in Alaska may be frostier than in Arizona — or only accessible by air or sea — the effects of NIET's high-impact support for instructional improvement remain the same.

Petersburg School District, located in southeast Alaska, is strengthening their instructional practices in partnership with the Alaska Council of School Administrators and NIET with funding from a federal Teacher and School Leader (TSL) Incentive Program grant. The district has created an instructional leadership team to develop a long-range plan and support teacher collaborative learning to improve student outcomes.

Heather Conn, principal of Stedman Elementary School in Petersburg, has already seen the impact of this collaborative learning. "It is so important to learn from others. I do not have all the tips or tricks for instructional best practices, so I let others support and share too," said Conn. "This allows them to find the power within our building. It builds the relationships across the staff and allows us to build collective efficacy in our school." ●





# Story of Success

DESOTO PARISH SCHOOLS | MANSFIELD, LOUISIANA



**D**eSoto Parish Schools educates nearly 5,000 students in northwest Louisiana, and over half are classified as economically disadvantaged. The district focuses on instructional best practices and building a growth mindset to help teachers and students thrive. These focus areas have led to increased student achievement and dramatically improved the quality of education that the district provides.

In 2008-09, DeSoto began partnering with NIET to implement the TAP System. At the time DeSoto began to implement TAP, student success was lagging. The district's graduation rate in 2008-09 was 68%, and they ranked 45th in the state in 2010. The TAP System gave DeSoto a new approach, allowing the district to implement foundational structures and protocols for increasing educator effectiveness, including the introduction of

teacher leadership roles and a shared leadership model.

## DESOTO'S STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

DeSoto has pursued a comprehensive approach to improvement over time. Three strategies stand out as important to their success: setting high expectations and giving support to meet them; providing individual feedback and coaching to every

teacher, school and district leader; and defining and pursuing high-quality instruction in every classroom.

## Set Goals and Provide Support to Achieve Them

DeSoto sets high expectations for teachers and students and provides the support necessary to meet or exceed goals. For teachers, professional learning provides collaborative time to analyze student data and student work, learn instructional strategies to address student needs, and plan how to apply strategies in upcoming lessons. Teacher leaders help teachers analyze data throughout the school year and adjust instructional strategies as needed. Students mirror this practice by developing their own goals and regularly checking in with teachers on their progress, resulting in a sense of student ownership.

## Individualize Feedback and Support

Teachers receive regular feedback via learning walks when administrators, school leaders, and teacher leaders visit classrooms to

observe instruction. This individual support builds relationships, offers timely feedback on teaching practices, and encourages personal reflection. The substantial level of teacher support helps the district recruit and retain effective teachers.

## Use a District-wide Instructional Framework

DeSoto has increased the instructional knowledge and skills of its educators by adopting an evidence-based rubric to define what high-quality instruction looks and sounds like in classrooms. With a common understanding of high-quality instruction, teacher leaders can provide tailored professional learning and individual coaching to address teacher and student needs. DeSoto's use of an instructional rubric promotes reflection and growth, allowing teachers and leaders to strengthen their practices.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Thanks to educators' work, DeSoto's culture is one of innovation and improvement. This is reflected in student

achievement gains made since partnering with NIET. In 2016, DeSoto earned its first "A" rating from the state and received additional "A" ratings in 2017, 2022, and 2023. DeSoto first achieved a graduation rate above 90% with the 2013-14 cohort and has maintained this rate for the past 10 years.

DeSoto Parish is one of only two districts in Louisiana to sustain a graduation rate of 90% or higher for that length of time.

DeSoto's transformation demonstrates the power of high-quality teaching practices and how a commitment to excellent teaching focused on high expectations every day can overcome barriers and help all students succeed. ●







## In Conversation

OMAR DURON

Omar Duron is superintendent of Somerton School District No. 11 in Arizona. He joined Somerton from Gadsden Elementary School District #32, where he honed his instructional leadership skills as a teacher leader and school leader.

### How has NIET shaped your career as an educator?

NIET equipped me with the essential framework to excel as a teacher leader. The master teacher role changed my career by allowing me to work with teachers, identify the strongest and most impactful instructional practices in our building, and bring those practices to other teachers and classrooms. The master teacher role showed me the importance of modeling and co-teaching with an educator, and how to help each teacher incorporate student data and student work in their instructional planning. This experience paved the way for my journey into school leadership.

### What is something you received through NIET's support that you wish every educator had, and why?

Our partnership with NIET created the structures and processes for teacher-driven collaborative learning with direct follow-up and coaching in classrooms. It helped elevate teachers into leadership roles that provided individualized support for classroom teachers

based on their students' needs. For me, professional learning that is focused on the needs of our students and teachers makes the biggest difference. Investing in teacher support is one of the most valuable decisions a district can make, as it directly contributes to improved student academic achievement.

### Why did you decide to continue a partnership with NIET once you took on the role of superintendent in a new district?

Student learning growth was the biggest driver of that decision. Teachers work hard to improve classroom instruction every day for every student. The NIET structures and processes create a powerful support system for teachers and build a team culture where teachers know they can reach out and receive high-quality support.

### What have you learned through being a teacher leader, a school leader, and now a system leader?

Building a growth mindset and a commitment to continuous improvement has to be backed up by real support. Teachers need

to know they are part of a team as we all embrace a commitment and a strategy to improve. Collaboration and opportunities to shape professional learning bring teachers into the process of driving that success and a willingness to try new things. Finally, it is essential to recognize the leadership potential in every teacher and encourage their continued professional growth, as it expands their ability to positively impact more students.

### What should NIET focus on in our next 25 years?

NIET should continue its focus on strengthening teacher leadership and fostering collaboration across districts. Maintaining its forward-thinking approach towards innovation and technology is crucial. By advancing its commitment to equity, inclusion, and data-driven practices, NIET can ensure that all students receive a high-quality education and opportunities for success. Ultimately, NIET should continue prioritizing educator well-being and resilience to cultivate positive, sustainable school cultures. ●



## BOOKEND

# Orangeburg County School District

## ORANGEBURG, SOUTH CAROLINA

Orangeburg County School District serves a diverse, high-need student population in rural South Carolina, and the district is committed to ensuring that all students have access to high-quality learning opportunities. To carry out this mission, Orangeburg administrators have focused on creating a district-wide positive learning culture. Not only do

students benefit from a positive learning environment tailored to their strengths and needs, but Orangeburg teachers are also part of professional learning communities that allow them to continuously improve their instructional practices.

Lockett Elementary School exemplifies the district's focus on

positive learning cultures. Lockett students are thriving, as reflected in the school's rating in South Carolina's education accountability system. Additionally, Lockett students outperformed students statewide in math on the 2022, 2023, and 2024 South Carolina College- and Career-Ready Assessment. ●





Students work in a small group at Henry Burkhart Elementary School in Perry Township Schools.

## Perry Township Schools and Marian University | Indiana

Expectations for teachers are high at Perry Township Schools in Indianapolis, and the district is committed to providing the support and coaching necessary for success. Perry’s adoption of the NIET *Teaching and Learning Standards Rubric* has created a common language across campuses, increasing access for every student to high-quality instruction.

To help new teachers meet its high expectations, Perry Township Schools joined the Marian Promise, a residency and induction partnership between local school districts, NIET, and Marian University’s Klipsch

Educators College. Through the Marian Promise, some aspiring teachers from the Klipsch Educators College complete a one-year residency in Perry Township Schools, where they benefit from hands-on classroom experience and mentoring. This assistance continues into their first two years of teaching, as they transition into full-time roles within the district after graduation. The residency experience and continued induction support mean that the new teachers enter the classroom prepared to meet Perry Township Schools’ high expectations and make an impact on student success.

Graduates of the Marian Promise experience a seamless transition between their clinical experience and their classrooms in Perry Township Schools. Perry uses the NIET *Teaching and Learning Standards Rubric*, offers varied career pathways, and implements weekly cluster meetings to promote shared learning among teachers. This approach to professional learning once in Perry — combined with their preparation at Marian — supports new teachers to be successful from day one, eliminating some of the challenges that first-year teachers face. ●

“I loved that I got a full year under a mentor where I could truly get my bearings as a new teacher. One semester just isn’t enough time.”

**HOPE SPAULDING**

MARIAN PROMISE GRADUATE AND CURRENT 8TH GRADE TEACHER  
SOUTHPORT MIDDLE SCHOOL, PERRY TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS, INDIANA



# Preparing Aspiring Teachers to Be Effective from Day One

BY DR. PAULA CALDERON, DEAN OF THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AT SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA UNIVERSITY, HAMMOND, LOUISIANA



Every school leader wants to ensure that all students have access to great teaching and learning experiences. And each leader knows that having an effective teacher is the most important factor in making that a reality. Yet, across the nation, a shortage of teachers threatens our ability to make this happen. At Southeastern Louisiana University, we are

tackling this shortage head-on and ensuring that our aspiring teachers enter the profession with the knowledge and skills to be effective from day one.

Southeastern Louisiana University is an institute of higher education located in the southeast corridor between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. As the third-largest university

in Louisiana, our institution has an enrollment of around 14,000 students — including those pursuing bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in our College of Education. Title II data from the 2021-22 school year showed Southeastern as the top producer of teachers in Louisiana. Southeastern has long provided a quality program for aspiring teachers. We began working with

NIET in 2015 to train our entire faculty on the NIET *Teaching and Learning Standards Rubric*. In 2017, Southeastern decided to deepen our partnership with NIET and expand our use of NIET's instructional rubric, embedding the indicators and domains in teacher candidates' coursework.

Now, teacher candidates at Southeastern are exposed to all of the rubric's indicators and domains from the outset, allowing them to gain confidence and understand what will be expected of them as teachers. Ultimately, this puts Southeastern's graduates at an advantage when compared to fellow new teachers. While many new teachers fear principal walk-throughs or evaluations, Southeastern's teacher candidates are comfortable with assessment.

When I was being trained as a student teacher, the main evaluation tool was a checklist that included questions such as, "Are they making eye contact with every student?" or "Did they smile enough?" In our partnership

with NIET though, Southeastern now provides aspiring teachers with an approach that is truly a comprehensive system based on tangible evidence and full feedback loops — not just a tick sheet of numbers and ratings.

This comprehensive system has helped our aspiring teachers gain confidence and understand what will be expected of them as teachers, and it helps them make connections between indicators of practice on the rubric before they take on a classroom of their own. They know how to get the students to answer their own questions rather than wait to be given the answer. They just do it as second nature.

Not only does our partnership with NIET help our students, but it also strengthens the K-12 school districts that work with our aspiring teachers. Mentor teachers of yearlong residents from Southeastern gain a more holistic view of high-quality observation and evaluation processes. Teachers in these districts improve

their own instructional practices as they provide coaching and feedback to aspiring teachers using the rubric.

Our aspiring teachers are fully classroom-ready by the time they get a job and the keys to a classroom. I hear from principals that most first-year teachers will say, "Thanks for the keys. Now what do I do?" However, principals who hire Southeastern's teachers have commented that they do not need to worry about our teachers — and that is the greatest compliment of Southeastern's partnership with NIET.

The first year as a teacher does not have to be a trial by fire. While there will always be challenges, we can do far more to prepare and support aspiring teachers to be successful in their early years. NIET's work with Southeastern and other teacher preparation programs is continuing to grow, and I am excited to see how the next phase of this work will advance the teaching profession. ●

"Principals who hire Southeastern's teachers have commented that they do not need to worry about our teachers — and that is the greatest compliment of Southeastern's partnership with NIET."

**DR. PAULA CALDERON**  
DEAN OF THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA UNIVERSITY, LOUISIANA



# Elevating Instructional Excellence with EE PASS



Desert View Elementary School,  
Gadsden Elementary School District #32, Arizona

Observing an effective teacher’s lesson is an excellent way to gain new ideas, reflect on your own practice, and identify potential areas for growth and improvement. The conversations sparked between a teacher and a coach when they watch a lesson together and debrief afterward help teachers reflect on and strengthen their instructional practices. Yet given the demands of a school schedule, teachers have few opportunities to observe other teachers’ classrooms.

Technology offers a way to increase teachers’ ability to observe effective teachers in action. NIET’s Educator Effectiveness Preparation and Support System (EE PASS) is a professional learning platform that provides real-time access to NIET’s trainings and resources to improve instruction and support professional development.

EE PASS houses a video library of classroom lessons across grade levels and subject areas, along with lesson plans and the

scores and evidence collected by observers. In addition to the full lesson video, the post-conference debriefing with the teacher to discuss the strengths of the lesson and how the lesson could have been improved is also available.

Individual teachers can watch, analyze, and discuss effective instructional practices using EE PASS. The platform and its resources are also a powerful tool for coaches, leaders, and evaluators to use in illustrating and discussing instruction. EE PASS resources and the video library are particularly valuable in conversations with teachers about how instructional practices need to change as new high-quality instructional materials are adopted.

EE PASS features, content, and resources are continuously expanded and refreshed — including during a system-wide upgrade in 2023. The new features from this recent upgrade include functionality that brings new content to your attention based on your profile — with “Recommended” and “Liked” content appearing at the top of the Content Library page.

EE PASS is user-friendly, with a modernized, customizable view and an innovative analytics panel that gives leaders access to real-

time observation and certification data. With all its resources, analytics, and customizations, EE PASS is useful and relevant for all educators, from classroom teachers to district administrators and everyone in between.

## TEACHERS OWN THEIR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING WITH EE PASS

Teachers and leaders can access EE PASS at any time of day and from any device. This unlimited, 24/7 access allows teachers to take charge of their own professional learning. In addition to coaching from teacher and school leaders, teachers can watch videos and access resources on topics that they wish to strengthen.

## EDUCATOR EFFECTIVENESS AND SUPPORT

EE PASS provides access to valuable professional development, training, and certification resources through a single port of entry.

### RESOURCE LIBRARY

Educators can choose what they would like to learn from a continuously updated resource library that includes videos, documents, and templates.



**569 RESOURCES FROM NIET’S NATIONAL CONFERENCE**, including PowerPoint slides, clips, and handouts from trainings



**40 MODULES** or interactive training experiences, featuring specific instructional indicators in the *Teaching and Learning Standards Rubric* and a variety of other topics



**55 DOCUMENTS** and templates to support collaboration and feedback



**369 CLIPS** that illustrate a range of topics, from classroom practice to leadership team meetings and coaching sessions

### VIDEO LIBRARY

Educators can learn from experts to further their understanding and effectiveness in various areas through videos, including footage from classroom lessons, pre- and post-conference discussions, cluster meetings, and leadership team meetings.

“It is powerful to watch another teacher use an instructional strategy and then be able to analyze what was effective or where I can improve. EE PASS allows me to do my own learning.”

**JESSICA CARMEAN**  
MASTER TEACHER  
JEFFERSON PARISH SCHOOLS, LOUISIANA



“EE PASS is a great resource for me as a master teacher. The videos are especially helpful as I support and coach teachers. I can look up videos of different instructional strategies to illustrate what they look like in a classroom.”

**LAURA HERSHBERGER**  
**MASTER TEACHER**  
**AVONDALE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT, ARIZONA**

**EE PASS STRENGTHENS  
 TEACHER LEADER  
 COACHING AND SUPPORT**

EE PASS is a valuable coaching tool for teacher leaders. Teacher leaders can either watch videos and walk through supporting documents alongside a teacher to demonstrate strategies, or EE PASS resources can be shared as follow-up materials from a coaching conversation. Teacher leaders can also use EE PASS to refine their own instructional skills.

**EE PASS PROVIDES  
 DISTRICT AND SCHOOL  
 LEADERS WITH INSIGHTS  
 ON TEACHER NEEDS**

EE PASS also has resources for district administrators and instructional leadership teams. EE PASS offers an easy-to-use interface for entering and analyzing teacher observation data. The system enhances the observation process by facilitating the collection and communication of relevant and actionable feedback. ●

“We use EE PASS as a management tool for teacher observations and feedback. After observations, EE PASS helps us determine teacher needs. It creates reports that are beneficial in planning professional learning for teachers. With these reports, we can determine what our teachers need to see modeled in a cluster meeting to strengthen their practice.”

**MINDY SEARCY**  
**DISTRICT EXECUTIVE MASTER TEACHER**  
**CROSS COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT, ARKANSAS**



Clinton Elementary School students are engaged in classroom lessons in Clinton City Schools, Tennessee.



FEATURE STORY

# Five Ways to Keep New Teachers in the Profession



Desert View Elementary School, Gadsden Elementary School District #32, Arizona

All teachers benefit from mentoring, support, and guidance — especially those who are stepping into their roles for the first time. Providing support for new teachers is a top priority for NIET and our partners, so we are always asking ourselves:

**How can we create a system that helps teachers thrive so that every student can achieve?**

Just as we must continue to make the improvements we know students need to succeed, we must also identify and work to provide new teachers with the support they need to be

successful. We have seen time and time again that one of the greatest benefits new educators can receive is support from teacher leaders who were once in their shoes.

During the 2023-24 school year, we held a series of focus groups with new teachers from across

Arizona to pinpoint exactly why teacher leaders are so helpful to new teachers. The new teachers shared insights with us 100 days into their first year in the classroom and again at the end of the school year. Ultimately, they identified five key ways in which teacher leaders helped them thrive.

1

## INCREASE FEEDBACK AND REDUCE ISOLATION

We have noted that strong onboarding helps new team members learn the culture of their school, understand their role, work more cohesively, achieve greater results, and stay in the profession longer.

Many new teachers in NIET partner schools brought up the importance of having a master teacher coach them on classroom instruction, incorporating the benefit of having in-person observation followed by personalized feedback. The more detailed and constructive feedback new teachers receive from teacher leaders, the more new teachers have to work with when it comes to improving their instruction.

One new teacher shared, “I like the observations because I appreciate the feedback. What did I do wrong? What can I do right? Their suggestions helped me step up my game, and I appreciate and am open to that. It makes you a better teacher.”

Feedback can also help eliminate feelings of isolation. When teachers share strategies with their peers, they have the opportunity to collaborate in teams, building a community of support around new teachers when they need it most.



2

## BUILD CONFIDENCE THROUGH CLEARLY DEFINED INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

New teachers emphasize the value of learning best practices from mentor teachers with a wealth of localized experience. When teacher leaders put themselves into the shoes of new teachers, their feedback and instruction become significantly more targeted, defined, and applicable to the classroom, offering new teachers a sense of confidence and fortification. During our focus groups, a new teacher said, “It is really nice having mentor teachers that are at our school and know how to implement the things they are talking about at these meetings straight into our classrooms.”

The coaching and feedback that teacher leaders provide are strengthened even more when schools use a rubric to create a common language. A detailed, research-based resource such as the NIET *Teaching and Learning Standards Rubric* allows teachers to analyze their own instructional lessons and refer to specific domains and indicators during collaboration and professional development with peers. “You have an opportunity to start looking at your lesson plans a little differently,” said a focus group teacher.

When combined with coaching from mentor teachers, the instructions and practices found in the NIET rubric assist new teachers with the professional growth that so many look for in their first year.



Slaughter Elementary School,  
East Feliciana Public Schools, Louisiana

3

## STAY POSITIVE AND CELEBRATE GROWTH AND ACHIEVEMENT

Another thing we know for sure? Supportive school environments attract and retain teachers, especially new ones. During one of our focus groups, the words “help” and “support” came up 75 times.

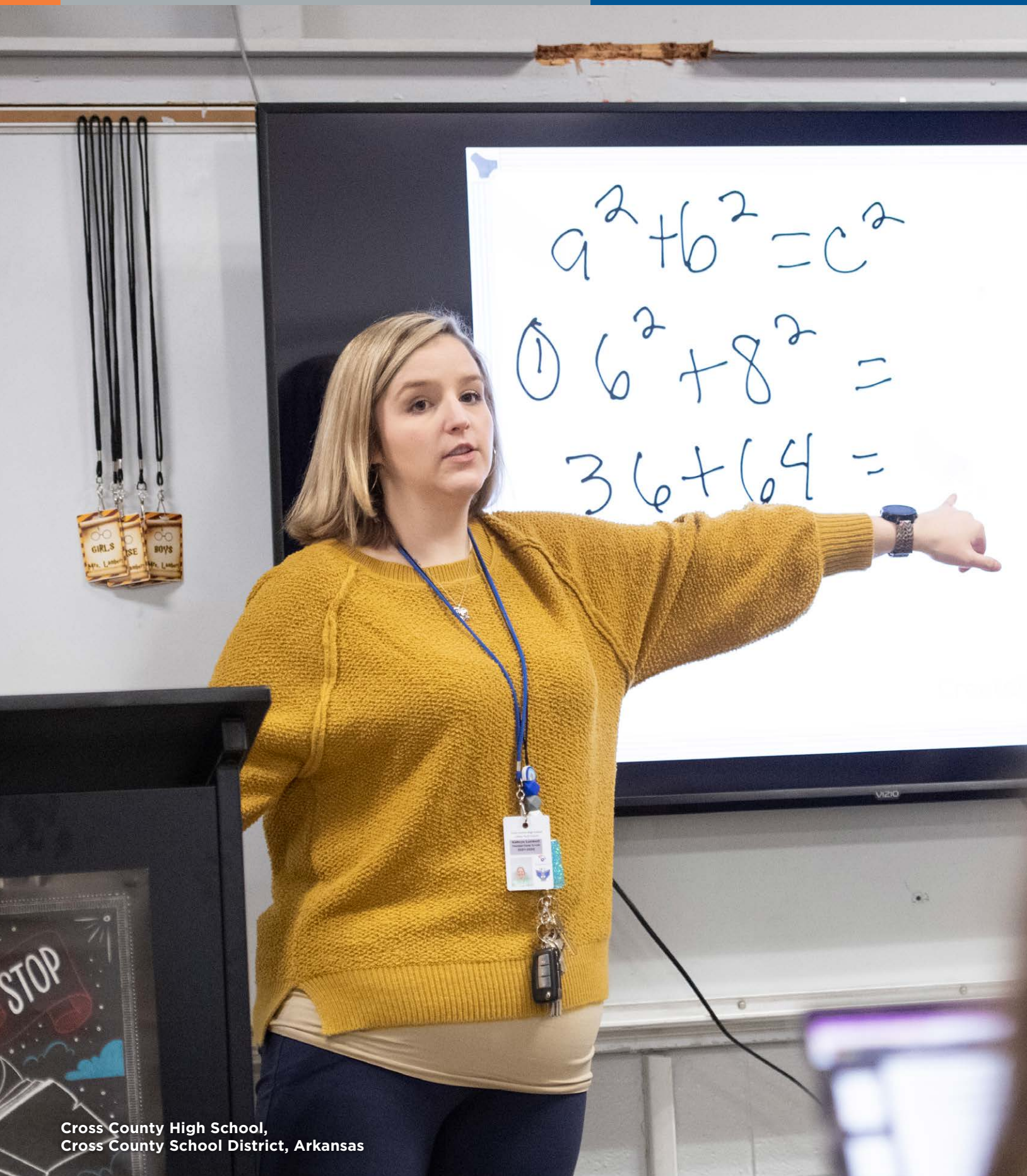
Students are not the only ones who thrive with encouragement and assurance; teachers and school leaders also find inspiration, motivation, and validation in positive environments. While participating in the focus groups, new teachers who had never met built off one another’s answers, complimented one another, and compared experiences and struggles — and all the new teachers agreed that taking moments to reflect on positivity in the classroom allows them to center themselves and rediscover the joy of teaching. “It is always nice to hear a compliment,” one teacher shared. “I feel like I am very hard on myself, so honestly, hearing the positives means so much.”

We must create and protect spaces where new teachers can find positives within the profession. It might look like setting aside time weekly to review best practices and answer questions. Or it might look like a kind note from a mentor or district leader who sees a teacher putting forth their best effort or making strides.



Somerset High School, Somerset  
Independent School District, Texas





Cross County High School,  
Cross County School District, Arkansas

## 4

## FOSTER LEADERSHIP TO CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROMOTION

Time and time again, new teachers cite the helpfulness of mentoring during their first year in the classroom. Much of the support they receive comes from more experienced teachers who have learned school culture and then passed along analytical and data-driven approaches to instructional practices that grow student achievement.

As we recognize the critical role that kind of mentorship has in the first year of a new teacher's career, we also must be mindful of fostering those leadership qualities and creating opportunities for new mentors to emerge, promoting the cycle of professional growth and support in our schools.

Everyone has varying abilities, strengths, and approaches to leadership. When implemented effectively, teacher leadership roles impact entire school communities. Teacher leaders field-test strategies in their classrooms, and when they share results and promote collaboration, they empower the rest of the school staff to follow in their footsteps.

Ultimately, the impacts of teacher leaders are what inspire the next cycle of teachers to continue improving instructional strategies and pursue professional pathways. When new teachers see the impact mentor and master teachers have on how they approach classroom instruction, they are inspired to strengthen their practices and develop leadership skills so they can similarly support their teammates.



## 5

## PRIORITIZE NEW TEACHERS BY SUPPORTING TEACHER LEADERS

Schools can invest in teacher leadership roles as a form of schoolwide support, promoting a system of collaboration and helping new teachers transition from being in class to teaching their own. To invest in teachers at all stages of their careers:

### Focus mentoring on instructional improvement.

Mentoring is most effective when it is grounded in student outcomes and the instructional needs of the new teacher. Schools can support this by adopting a cycle of coaching for continuous improvement and creating opportunities for mentors to collaborate on instructional and coaching best practices. This will foster a growth mindset among new teachers and mentors alike.

### Support mentors to be more effective by giving them what they need to succeed.

Successful mentor programs have a clear purpose and a vision for improving teaching and learning. They include dedicated time and training for mentorship, an evidence-based instructional rubric, and clearly defined mentor roles that include additional compensation.

### Align the mentoring program with systems and goals recognized throughout the school and the district.

Mentoring must be tied to school, district, and state initiatives, and mentors should be connected to the school leadership team. When districts support teacher leaders and integrate them into the school leadership structure, it keeps the mentoring program in line with district and school priorities.



Lake Marion High School, Orangeburg County School District, South Carolina

**Research and our experiences continually show that when new teachers lack support, a positive environment, leadership, and recognition, retention suffers. At NIET, we are proud to support and partner with those who meet this challenge head-on: successful district leaders, school leaders, teacher leaders, and university and state leaders. We know that when we learn from one another, we will continue supporting new teachers to be successful from day one. ●**



PHOTO GALLERY

# A Network to Improve Teaching and Learning



NIET is honored to be part of a network of tens of thousands of outstanding educators working to improve teaching and learning across the country. In 2024, NIET moved to further engage this powerful network through two new programs: The NIET Fellows Program launched with an inaugural cohort of 12 educators, and our Education Leaders Network kicked off with nearly 200 participants.

The NIET Fellows learn alongside NIET in a one-year program to deepen their knowledge of instructional best practices to

more effectively support the work taking place within and beyond their school and district. Our Education Leaders Network members collaborate virtually in

communities of practice, bringing a new focus to the impact of investing in teacher leadership.

## MEET THE 2024 NIET FELLOWS

**LATONZIA BEAVERS**  
Natchitoches Parish Schools  
Louisiana

**ERICA FAUST**  
Ouachita Parish Schools  
Louisiana

**WILLIAM MOCK**  
Somerset Independent School District  
Texas

**SARAH PHILLIPS**  
Perry Township Schools  
Indiana

**KELSEY BROWN**  
Laurens County School District 55  
South Carolina

**LAURA HERSHBERGER**  
Avondale Elementary School District  
Arizona

**JESSICA OCKMAN**  
Ascension Public Schools  
Louisiana

**STEPHEN PRINCE**  
Cross County School District  
Arkansas

**JESSICA CARMEAN**  
Jefferson Parish Schools  
Louisiana

**EMILY MCLELLAN**  
Iberville Parish Schools  
Louisiana

**PALOMA PERALTA CARRILLO**  
Gadsden Elementary School District #32  
Arizona

**HALEY WOOD**  
Warren County Schools  
Tennessee

### TEACHER LEADERS IMPACT SCHOOLWIDE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT



“I became a teacher leader because I wanted to be a part of the change process to raise student achievement district-wide. As a teacher leader, I get to build the capacity of everyone. However, it is not just about me supporting teachers, but also about administrators supporting teacher leaders — all to raise student achievement. We all have a common purpose and alignment: to help increase student achievement.”

**LATONZIA BEAVERS**  
NATCHITOCHE PARISH SCHOOLS,  
LOUISIANA



**TEACHER LEADERS HELP TEACHERS IMPLEMENT HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS**



“As a former district instructional coach, a priority for me was making sure that teachers were prepared to teach effective lessons. I sat down with teachers weekly and really made sure that they understood the standards and knew what the highest level of the standard looks like in student work. This time helped teachers internalize our curricula and the high-quality instructional materials that we use in Warren County. It helped get us all on the same page around what we are teaching, how we are teaching, and whether students have grasped the concepts.”

**HALEY WOOD**  
WARREN COUNTY SCHOOLS,  
TENNESSEE

**TEACHER LEADERS SUPPORT TEACHERS AT ALL EXPERIENCE LEVELS**



“One of the biggest challenges we are addressing is balancing teachers coming from different career paths with ensuring that our kids have equitable access to great teaching. We want students to have the same high-quality education whether they are in a veteran teacher’s classroom, a first-year teacher’s classroom, or a classroom led by a teacher transitioning from another career. As a teacher leader, I can meet the needs of teachers regardless of their experience level and help everyone elevate their impact on students.”

**KELSEY BROWN**  
LAURENS COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT 55,  
SOUTH CAROLINA

**TEACHER LEADERS ANALYZE STUDENT WORK TO SEE EVIDENCE OF LEARNING**

“One of the big things that we are working on in my school is analyzing student data. Student data is the evidence that students are learning, and we need to build teacher capacity in tracking and analyzing student work. My goal for the school year is to not only have teachers tracking data but to also have students tracking and analyzing their own data.”

**ERICA FAUST**  
OUACHITA PARISH SCHOOLS,  
LOUISIANA



**TEACHER LEADERS SUPPORT TEACHERS WITH REAL-TIME RESOURCES**

“I like to figure out how to best support each teacher, to sit down and work together on strategies they can use to push the needle forward. I can best support teachers when we have this one-on-one time to plan and fine-tune their practices. In these conversations, I often pull up videos in EE PASS as a coaching tool. This way, the teacher can see teacher and student actions in a classroom example. We then debrief about the video and identify the next steps to implement practices in their classroom.”

**WILLIAM MOCK**  
SOMERSET INDEPENDENT SCHOOL  
DISTRICT, TEXAS





# Story of Success

CROSS COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT | CHERRY VALLEY, ARKANSAS



*A Cross County Elementary School student and her teacher review an assignment.*

**C**ross County School District is located in Cherry Valley, Arkansas, in the northeastern corner of the state. Across two campuses, Cross County serves a rural community of over 600 students, the majority of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. For more than a decade, Cross County has partnered with NIET to strengthen instruction and create opportunities for teachers to grow as leaders.

Cross County has struggled with many of the challenges facing rural schools across the nation, including retaining effective teachers, the need for educators

to serve multiple roles, lower teacher salaries, and large percentages of students from low-income backgrounds.

Through the TAP System, Cross County School District created and sustained a performance-based compensation and human capital management system that provides high-impact support for educators.

The high level of support for improvement has addressed the challenges facing this rural district and made positive impacts on school culture, teacher effectiveness, and student achievement.

## CROSS COUNTY'S STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

With the structures in place from the TAP System, Cross County created a multiyear improvement plan. One important early decision was to set aside time each week for teacher collaboration and classroom follow-up by teacher leaders. This allowed teachers to more deeply understand high-quality instructional materials and practices. In addition, school leadership teams improved their use of student data and student work to identify and close learning gaps.

“For our small school and our small community, the partnership with NIET came around at the best moment because we were looking to reform our school, support our teachers more, make them even more effective, grow our students, and help them achieve more.”

**STEPHEN PRINCE**  
**MASTER TEACHER**  
**CROSS COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL**





## Provide Time for Educators to Collaborate

One of the most important investments the district made was to set aside time each week for teams of teachers to collaborate to address student needs and strengthen teacher practices. Through weekly professional learning meetings and high-quality observation and feedback, teacher leaders work with classroom teachers to identify specific areas where they can help students access grade-level learning and meet challenging academic goals.

## Deepen Understanding of a High-Quality Literacy Curriculum

Having collaborative learning structures and weekly meetings for teacher and school leaders in place provides the space for gaining a deeper understanding of how instructional materials can be used to support individual students. Cross County High School adopted a new literacy curriculum in the summer of 2021 to better support students in reaching the depth of knowledge required by grade-level standards. The professional

learning meetings and teacher coaching structures were essential as teachers worked to adjust their strategies and practices to implement high-quality instructional materials in literacy.

## Set Instructional Goals Based on Student Work

In Cross County, building-level instructional leadership teams analyze student data and set goals that drive professional learning over the course of the year. The district convenes these teams during the summer to analyze student data and plan professional learning, creating a foundation

for addressing learning gaps. During this time, staff members dig into data and student work to understand specific student needs and identify strategies to address them. Master teachers then play a key role once the school year starts by field-testing the strategies in classrooms and bringing results back to the instructional leadership team. The leadership team then shares effective practices across

the faculty and helps refine instructional goals.

### WHAT'S NEXT?

Cross County's investment in educator effectiveness has had a significant impact on student achievement growth. The district was one of only a few districts in Arkansas to increase student performance from 2019 to 2021 in reading, and in 2023,

Cross County School District outperformed students statewide in English, math, reading, and science. With the help of the TAP System structures, Cross County School District has increased the retention rate of effective teachers from 75% to 92%. Cross County is continuously raising teacher excellence and student achievement. ●





# In Conversation

CHRISTY WALL



Clinton Elementary School, Clinton City Schools, Tennessee

Christy Wall is the Assistant Commissioner of Academics and Instructional Strategy at the Tennessee Department of Education. Her work with students, teachers, and administrators focuses on continuous improvement and instructional impact.



### How has NIET changed the teaching landscape in Tennessee?

NIET has a long history of partnership with districts in Tennessee and involvement in state-level educational improvement. NIET delivered statewide training for thousands of educators and leaders on the statewide TEAM evaluation system, which builds on NIET's evidence-based teaching and learning standards.

More recently, NIET has been supporting districts to implement high-quality curricula in reading and math as a partner to districts in the Tennessee Literacy Instruction Networks, Early Literacy 2.0 Regional

Networks, and Tennessee Math Implementation Grants for districts supporting the adoption of new high-quality instructional materials (HQIM).

As teachers begin to use new high-quality instructional materials, NIET is training school and teacher leaders to coach teachers to build their knowledge and skills, connecting a new curriculum to the effective practices needed to deliver it so that every student is engaged in the learning.

### What is it about this approach that has had the greatest impact?

While our focus is on delivering high-quality instruction, the systems and processes districts and schools need to build their capacity to lead this work are absolutely critical.

NIET has helped district and school leaders build strong systems for teacher collaboration, goal-setting, and observation and feedback. These structures are the foundation for ongoing improvements in instruction and student learning.

### What makes NIET different from other partners?

Building the capacity of others and creating systems that generate growth and improvement are the hallmarks of NIET's approach. Their highly skilled staff and content experts add capacity to district leaders and provide sustained support with the implementation of HQIM.

### What should NIET focus on in our next 25 years?

First, NIET should continue to provide support and instructional leadership capacity for building-level leaders and instructional coaches, all of whom support teachers. Second, implementation practices for new HQIM across content areas will need to be prioritized.

This work is complex and difficult to sustain; however, if we can invest in the ongoing support of those who are implementing and monitoring instructional change, we will be able to maintain momentum. ●





BOOKEND

# Our Team

Our incredible team sets us apart and is at the heart of what we do every day. We are educators with years of experience, leading this work firsthand, and we spend hours each week walking alongside teachers and principals through the halls and classrooms of their schools, asking questions and building capacity to help them grow. We are also

professionals and experts in our fields, from communications to finance. Together, our team brings deep expertise and a variety of experiences to our work with partners across the nation.

At NIET, we believe we can work with any school to help them take what they are doing to the next level — no matter where they are.

We know because we have seen success in all kinds of schools, from Phoenix and New Orleans to rural Tennessee and Alaska. We have optimism and belief in what teachers and students are capable of, and we wake up every day excited to see them reach their highest expectations. There is so much in store for the next 25 years.

## Our Team Members

Britney Allen  
 Katrina Aponte  
 Kennette Bardell  
 Joshua Barnett  
 Abby Barton  
 Melissa Blossom  
 Jennifer Board  
 Nicole Bolen  
 Robbin Boudreaux  
 Jennifer Oliver Brady  
 Nicholas Brassfield  
 Bobbie Jo Bright  
 Teddy Broussard  
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 Sarah Jolly-Swift  
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 Molly Kwas  
 Davita Lancelin  
 Breonne LaSalle  
 Jodi Leckbee  
 Trevor Leutscher  
 Lori Line  
 Handrea Logis  
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 Stephanie Reiners  
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 Dena Rooks  
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 Tad Savage  
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 Amber Simpson  
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 Kimberlyn Slagle  
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# NIET

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR  
EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING



Twenty-five years after introducing the TAP System, NIET Founder and Chairman Lowell Milken continues to visit schools across the country to celebrate teachers and advance reforms to ensure that every student is guided by a professional worthy of the name *teacher*.

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