

Investing in What Works

Philanthropic investors play a critical role in spurring innovation in public schools and meeting student needs, and in 2020, NIET has partnered with philanthropic organizations in three key projects to support districts in real time as they navigate the pandemic.

Advancing Innovation in Tennessee Rural Districts

In partnership with the The Ayers Foundation, Ayers Institute for Teacher Learning and Innovation, and State Collaborative on Reforming Education

The Tennessee Rural Acceleration and Innovation Network (TRAIN) was established quickly in summer 2020 to support 15 rural districts — most of which are considered economically distressed or at-risk — as they prepared for back-to-school and considered what professional development their teachers and leaders most needed for 2020-21.

Starting in July, TRAIN districts engaged in weekly collaboration with NIET and Ayers Institute consultants to develop continuous learning plans, design and provide professional development to start the year, and solve key problems. Monthly meetings provide opportunities to share highlights and best practices, and all districts are now regularly working with NIET and Ayers Institute specialists to provide ongoing support for educators.

“Supporting rural Tennessee has been my passion, and this is a moment when I believe philanthropy must play a role

in ensuring students and teachers in rural Tennessee have what they need to be successful,” said Janet Ayers, president of The Ayers Foundation.

Supporting Teachers and School Leaders in Rural Arkansas

In partnership with the Walton Family Foundation

Building on an idea sparked by the TRAIN initiative, NIET partnered with the Walton Family Foundation on a 3-year, \$4.85 million grant to deliver high-quality remote and in-person learning to a network of 25 rural districts. NIET partnered with the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators to select the partner districts in the fall and is engaging in a strengths-based needs assessment to focus support in areas like curriculum implementation, teacher leadership, principal leadership, and virtual/remote instruction. Additionally, the partners will have the chance to participate in regular networking sessions to share best practices.

After the first year, NIET will build a longer-term plan for each partnering district to ensure sustainability and increase schools’ instructional capacity. As the project progresses, the partnership can point to strategies and approaches that Arkansas leaders could take statewide.

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Janet Ayers, president of The Ayers Foundation



As part of the TRAIN network, the 15 rural districts meet monthly in virtual meetings to learn and problem-solve together.

Equipping School Leaders to Support Character Education

In partnership with The Kern Family Foundation

Under a \$1.8 million grant, NIET is working with The Kern Family Foundation to develop and pilot a companion tool to the *NIET Principal Standards Rubric* that will help school leaders integrate effective character development and social-emotional learning (SEL) skills into instruction and school culture. This project, Accelerating Character Education and Development (ACED), will give leaders concrete practices and coaching tools to embed strong character education into their instructional leadership approach. Once created, NIET will provide training and videos of promising practices, as well as host interviews with effective principals and small groups. NIET will also develop four online modules for principals to deepen and continue their learning.

The work kicked off this fall with an advisory council meeting to garner ideas and shape the direction of the work. The 3-year project consists of a 2-phase pilot that will ensure the tools and resources are high-quality and reliable before they are offered broadly to schools nationwide.