



# SUSTAINING INNOVATIONS THAT HAVE **IMPACT**

**W**ith the passage of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, one of the most anticipated changes was the federal government handing the baton back to states to lead K-12 policy reform. While federal requirements for testing remain, states as “laboratories of democracy” are empowered to design interventions to support school improvement.

One big obstacle to their success, however, has been the challenge of innovating at the state and district levels where a range of constraints limits attempts to try something different. That is why the experience of districts and states in the federal Teacher and School Leader Incentive Fund (TSL) and the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grants is instructive. The work in these districts provides a range of evidence-based examples of how to strengthen classroom practices that are highly relevant for other districts and states.

Competitive grants require applicants to think comprehensively about reform and to logically align their systems of educator support or “human capital management” with their academic and school goals. What is innovative about this? It pushes districts to explicitly align a range of previously disconnected processes for recruitment, hiring, professional learning, evaluation, career advancement, leadership opportunities and compensation. The grants support districts to create a long-term vision, outline the key steps necessary to get there, and

integrate more effective practices into existing systems. By breaking the cycle of layering new requirements on top of old without a unifying vision, districts — many for the first time — now have in place a vision and language for improvement that underlie budgets, programs and culture.

Partnering with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) and implementing the TAP System created a system of teacher and school leader improvement and growth across each district. The systems put in place through TAP support the district’s ability to be innovative in response to new challenges and to identify and sustain those practices that lead to improvement. Below are some of the challenges these high-need districts continue to face, and what mechanisms they have instituted to overcome them.

### RECRUITING AND HIRING EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

Somerset Independent School District (SISD), located outside San Antonio, Texas, serves a high-need student population with a large number of English language learners. By implementing the TAP System, SISD created systems of support in each of its high-need schools using a cadre of teacher leaders working with school leaders to deliver high-quality school-based professional learning, and individualized classroom coaching. Through the use of research-based teaching standards that provide a common language for instructional improvement, Somerset’s teaching staff has extensive support to deliver

a rigorous and challenging curriculum. Performance-based compensation pioneered under the federal grant has evolved to serve the unique needs of the district, and provides an important tool in recruiting effective teachers.

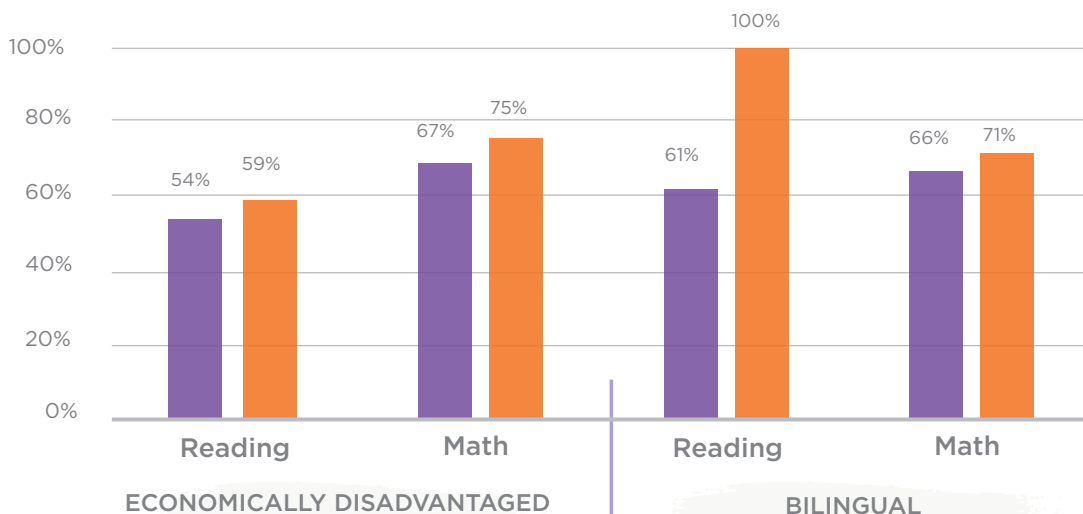
These improvements led to dramatic gains in student academic achievement, particularly for students with the greatest learning gaps, including English language learners. The high school graduation rate increased to 94 percent in 2017.

Yet to hire effective teachers — especially those in traditionally hard-to-staff positions like bilingual or special education — the district continued to struggle to compete against 16 better funded adjacent districts. SISD thus responded by working with NIET to grow its own teachers. Through a partnership with Texas Tech University (TTU), the district created a “grow your own” program with community colleges in the Somerset area to identify and develop local teachers. Students with an associate’s degree can participate in the 12-calendar month-long program to earn their teacher certification through TTU. TTU offers support via an on-site coordinator, and teacher candidates are embedded in schools where they participate in observations and learn the TAP System. Their coursework is delivered by TTU at the school site. There were 14 candidates in the first cohort, and all but one were hired by SISD. There are 21 in the 2017 cohort. SISD benefits by developing local teachers who have ties to the community. As such, most

### Somerset ISD’s High-Need Students Increase Achievement

Percent of Third-Grade Students Scoring Level II Satisfactory or Above on STAAR Texas State Assessment

2016  
2017



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**DR. SAUL HINOJOSA**  
*Superintendent*  
*Somerset Independent School District*

are bilingual and representative of the diverse student population. An added bonus is that district staff knows the quality of each teacher candidate before hiring and how he or she would fit into the desired school's culture.

Somerset ISD Superintendent Dr. Saul Hinojosa adds that, “The leadership team identifies and develops teachers along the career path. We can then draw from within our own staff when a leadership opportunity arises. Part of the culture has to be trust, and the career path enables districts to build that culture of trust.”

Cross County Community School District, located in northeastern Arkansas, also uses the structures and procedures of the TAP System to strengthen teacher development and support. Despite improvements in both teacher effectiveness and student learning, the district continues to have difficulty recruiting teachers due to its rural location. Because local colleges are not producing enough teacher candidates, Cross County partnered with Arkansas Tech University, located about three hours from the district. The partnership supports teacher candidates with a stipend during their internship, and offers them a potential position upon graduation with a higher starting salary than a traditional first-year teacher. These additional recruitment strategies have been successful in attracting a larger number of new applicants, while the structures for teacher growth and career advancement already in place through TAP have supported the hiring and retention of new teachers.

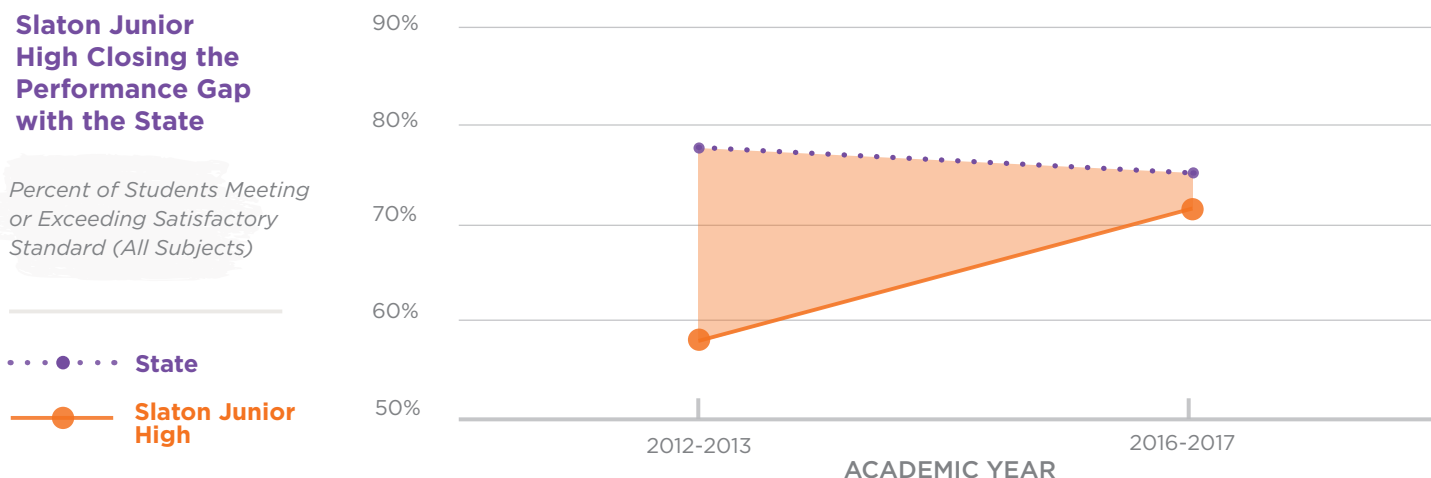


## ENSURING THAT EVERY STUDENT HAS EQUITABLE ACCESS TO EFFECTIVE TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERS

The need to improve educational outcomes for high-need students has been a driving factor in efforts to innovate by NIET’s partners in Texas’ Slaton Independent School District. The district is using the TAP System to close achievement gaps between its high-need student populations and the state average. Slaton ISD’s progress from 2012 to 2017 is reflected in the achievements of Slaton Junior High School as illustrated below. These results gained the attention of state policymakers.

### Slaton Junior High Closing the Performance Gap with the State

*Percent of Students Meeting or Exceeding Satisfactory Standard (All Subjects)*



For example, the Texas Equity Plan, part of the state’s implementation of ESSA, includes a range of interventions that directly align to the steps taken by Texas districts partnering with NIET to support equitable access to effective teaching in high-need schools. These interventions include the development of teacher leadership roles, building the capacity to deliver professional learning in-house, combining observation with detailed, timely feedback that produces measurable improvements in classroom practice, and using leadership opportunities and strategic compensation to support placement and retention.

Even with the strong gains made using the TAP System and educator effectiveness best practices, it is an ongoing challenge to ensure that the most effective teachers and principals are reaching the students that need them the most. It is still too often the case that the highest-need schools and classrooms have fewer experienced teachers and higher turnover rates. Using the experience gained from introducing performance into compensation systems with the support of a Teacher Incentive Fund grant, the districts are using strategic compensation to recruit more effective teachers. The compensation systems are also

supporting principals in recruiting teachers through career fairs targeting effective teachers with incentives such as signing bonuses, along with funds to support training and placement of school leaders in high-need schools.

In addition, NIET’s partner districts are developing school leaders through a principal mentor program in partnership with NIET and Texas Tech University. The principal fellows program addresses deficiencies in traditional principal preparation — particularly the lack of training for aspiring principals to supporting teachers in improving their instructional skills. The fellowship enables incoming principals to learn how to create distributed leadership

teams and empower teacher leaders as a core strategy for strengthening classroom instructional practices. (Read more about the principal fellows program on page 20.)

## DEFINING AND BUILDING THE CORE SKILLS NEEDED BY TEACHER LEADERS

As districts embed new teacher leader roles, they can expect to face challenges in scaling up these practices over time. For example, defining the leadership roles and expectations for principals, master and mentor teachers in ways that are consistent across the district is essential to success. Schools often begin to evolve these roles in different fashions, which creates confusion at the district level. As districts take on a greater role in developing and growing their own leaders, they find an increasing need to create and communicate clear, consistent expectations for teacher leader positions across schools.

Hinojosa found that some of his mentor teachers, in particular, needed additional training and support in leadership skills to fulfill the accountability side of their role. The district thus committed additional resources to

build the capacity of mentors toward providing feedback and holding teachers accountable for expectations.

Farther west, Dr. Betsy Hargrove, superintendent of Avondale Elementary School District #44 in Phoenix, Arizona, also found the mentor teacher role particularly important to get right. She comments on the importance of developing the skills of mentor teachers and clearly defining their responsibilities within a school: “The mentor teacher role is challenging since you have to designate enough time for effective coaching and classroom support, and decide how to prioritize this time.”

Over time, educators in TAP schools come to better understand the specific job requirements, expectations, challenges and benefits of the role, and to engage in defining these roles in their own school and district. Other teachers see the time, effort and difficult work that master and mentor teacher roles require. Master Teacher Liz Martin in Goshen, Indiana, explains, “It is important to articulate and share with potential new teacher leaders the work they will be doing, but also the impact they can have as part of the leadership team.” It is particularly important to build on the strength of the mentor teachers, Martin says. Due to their frequent interactions with teachers and students and their leadership roles, mentors are able to share what is needed to move student achievement. They have a voice now in decision-making, and are using it.

## STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF THE DISTRICT IN SUSTAINING IMPROVEMENT

In Perry Township, located in Indianapolis, Indiana, Assistant Superintendent Vickie Carpenter describes how her district uses the TAP Rubric as a lens for all other

programs and initiatives. “The district’s goal is for teachers to know they are being supported instead of being given another program or strategy to figure out,” she says. “We emphasize the importance of using evidence.”

Carpenter explains that the practices and activities articulated in the TAP System serve as a metric for Perry Township Schools to avoid competing “add-on” programs and ensure that any new initiatives integrated into the school are aligned with existing work. For example, a district was able to seamlessly integrate an initiative to target Perry’s large ELL population into the existing work being done by teacher leaders.

Perry Township also provides an example of how both fiscal and programmatic changes must be made to sustain successful practices. From the beginning, districts such as Perry committed local dollars to implement TAP, making long-term sustainability a district priority. They also allocated Title I and Title II funds, particularly to support teacher leader roles. In Carpenter’s view, “Sustainability has been possible due to the district’s allocation of general fund and other dollars to support continued implementation of TAP structures.”

Over time, NIET partner districts find that the systems they put in place through TAP enable them to respond more effectively to new challenges as they arise, further strengthening their commitment.

As states take a leading role in defining how to meet challenging academic achievement targets in the ESSA era, the experiences of these districts illustrate how to balance a commitment to innovation with an ability to identify and sustain the most impactful new practices. 