



Hayward Jean joined fellow Orangeburg teachers and leaders to collaborate on what the next phase of learning looks like. Mellichamp Elementary was one of NIET's first partners to implement School Improvement Solutions, and after the first year, state test results showed fourth and fifth grade students made multi-point jumps in both English language arts and math.

The Power of Partnerships

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President John F. Kennedy once said, "Partnership is not a posture but a process - a continuous process that grows stronger each year as we devote ourselves to common tasks."

Perhaps the greatest example of this type of partnership is NIET's partnership with Mellichamp Elementary School. In my eight years as principal of Mellichamp, I have never before engaged in



an instructional partnership that is as invested in building teacher capacity. NIET has demonstrated to us that sustainable school success can be achieved through powerful reflection.

Mellichamp is located in rural Orangeburg, South Carolina, near two historically black colleges and universities. Out of 32 schools in the district, Mellichamp has the highest poverty rate. Eight years ago, I was appointed to lead this school, which is well-respected in the community for supporting students' basic needs. However, persistent academic challenges had led to a consistent "At-Risk" rating by the state.

While maintaining our high standard of providing for children's basic needs, it was necessary to assemble all of Mellichamp's instructional leaders - administrators, lead teachers, and influential support staff - to revisit and refine our instructional priorities. In my experience, it is important for all staff to understand that providing a high-quality education is itself a basic need, just like food, clothes, and shelter. Mellichamp's culture immediately shifted, and student performance improved. We even earned the school's first Palmetto Silver Award for academic performance. While this was an awesome accomplishment, we knew that the effort to maintain and sustain this momentum would take an even greater commitment. As we searched for data-driven programs that would help us continue our growth, we actually experienced a decrease in student achievement.

SUSTAINING A SHIFT

After seeing programs come and go, it became clear to us that the greatest factor in raising student achievement is the teacher. At that point, my team and I decided to stop buying programs and start building people. Our School

Improvement Solutions partnership with NIET was formed to create a system for continuous improvement. NIET helped us build a culture of reflection, strength-based teaching, collaboration, student engagement, and student ownership.

From the start of the strengths-based needs assessment given by NIET's Dr. Ann Shaw, I knew we were in for a collaborative partnership unlike any other. Dr. Shaw's initial conversations weren't about students as data but how our instructional systems and practices align with the shared vision for our scholars. The conversations were centered on highlighting the best practices of our faculty and staff, and we developed a plan together with our entire school community to build our capacity and sustain a culture of continuous improvement.

The professional development offered by NIET provoked instructional conversations that launched an authentic and rich professional learning community. The sounds of students collaboratively creating their own student success criteria was evidence of teachers and students having a laser focus on communicating, interpreting, and meeting the expectations of the standards. For me, the opportunity to walk with NIET specialists in and out of classrooms, and discuss the areas of reinforcement and refinement was empowering.

This is a new beginning for Mellichamp Elementary School as we are taking our partnership with NIET to the next level through the TAP System. We are grateful for the greater effect we are able to have on our scholars' lives as a result. We often say, "We put the 'champ' in Mellichamp!" NIET is a partner that helps us to fulfill this motto daily for our scholars because the greatest champions we can be are "champions for children!" ●