

FEATURE STORY

20 Tips We Have Learned

FROM THE LAST 20 YEARS

The team at NIET has had the opportunity to learn from and alongside some of the best educators in the country for the past two decades. Along the way, we have gained significant insight into how best to support and prepare effective teachers and leaders and how intentional, sustained investments to develop these individuals directly lead to student success.

We wanted to recap 20 lessons we have learned from the past 20 years that can benefit our partners, supporters, and the broader education community. Whether you are a teacher, principal, district or school leader, or otherwise invested in educator excellence, we hope that these lessons will be useful to your own work.



NIET's conferences have been popular since the very beginning—with some familiar faces each year. Teddy Broussard, now NIET's senior trainer, joined the organization in 2013 as executive director of the Louisiana Teacher Advancement Program and continues to provide training and assistance to teacher leaders and principals across the country. Here at one of the earliest conferences in 2003, Teddy always has been focused on building educators' leadership skills.



Desert View Elementary School; Gadsden Elementary School District; San Luis, Arizona

1

Make great classroom teaching the centerpiece of every school. It is easy to get distracted by the next new program or initiative, but 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. Keep the main thing, the main thing. Invest in the most powerful levers for change – teachers and the leaders who support them.

2

Engage a broad group of stakeholders, especially those who are working day in and day out with students, to design and implement instructional changes and improvements. Buy-in from those directly involved in implementation is crucial to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of new practices.

3

Create opportunities for innovation. For example, grants can give educators the ability to try new approaches. Federal, state, and outside funding can provide early support for innovative practices and help scale the most effective initiatives. At the same time, it's essential that districts have “skin in the game” and commit their own resources to ensure the long-term sustainability of new ideas and programs.

4

Assess the needs AND strengths of each school and district, and let those drive your efforts. While NIET has developed research-based practices and structures, these tools are most effective when implemented in ways that address the unique needs of students and capitalize on the strengths of the community. No school or district operates in the same way.

5

Invest in building the skills and knowledge of new teachers, and recognize the importance of educator preparation programs in strengthening the talent pipeline. The early years of preparation play an outsized role in determining whether a teacher gets off to a strong start or struggles and potentially leaves the profession.



Cross County Elementary School; Cross County School District; Cherry Valley, Arkansas

INSTRUCTIONAL EXCELLENCE

NIET is committed to raising achievement levels for all students, and the most important in-school factor for determining student success is teacher quality. The following advice covers effective teacher preparation, coaching, collaboration, and more, all seeking to advance NIET's vision that every student is taught by an excellent teacher.

6

Develop a common language and understanding around excellent instruction based on a research-based instructional framework or rubric as the foundation for observation, feedback cycles, and coaching.

7

Adopt research-based practices, tools, and protocols or collaborative structures to enhance teachers' ability to transfer the work of learning teams into daily instructional practice. Such practices may include setting clear, measurable goals for collaborative learning teams that align with district and school goals; developing research-based learning strategies in response to students' needs; providing ample time for teachers to incorporate the learning strategies into their planning; analyzing student work; and tracking individual student progress toward mastery of the standards.

8

Support teachers through structured collaborative learning opportunities, coaching teachers in their classrooms, engaging in a strong observation and feedback cycle, and helping teachers understand the connection between their instructional practice and student outcomes. The most effective collaborative learning structures focus on linking instruction to curriculum and bringing coherence to all initiatives by showing how they fit into a comprehensive instructional approach.



TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Developing teacher leadership roles is not always easy, but it is worthwhile. Creating a network of effective and empowered teacher leaders builds trust among classroom educators, eases the implementation of new initiatives or reforms, and ultimately improves student outcomes. Here's what we've learned about how to most effectively create leadership and mentoring opportunities for educators:

9

Develop teacher leader roles designed to systematically and reliably improve teaching and accelerate student learning. To accomplish this, teacher leaders should have significant responsibility for managing and implementing research-proven, high-impact levers for improving instruction; leading collaborative learning teams; conducting formal observations to provide actionable feedback to teachers; modeling effective instructional practice in classrooms; and engaging in classroom-based coaching.

10

Leverage teacher leaders to encourage consistency across major instructional improvement initiatives. Teachers often suffer from “reform fatigue,” not only because of the amount of change they are being asked to accommodate, but also because new initiatives are frequently rolled out to teachers across multiple platforms in disconnected ways. Many of NIET’s partners have found that teacher leadership roles offer a strategic opportunity to create more coherence. Teacher leaders can field test new strategies, and these leaders can leverage school-based professional development to help other educators integrate new strategies into their own classroom practice.

11

Select teacher leaders who have the right set of accomplishments, skills, and dispositions to succeed. Instructional teacher leadership roles are highly demanding positions that require commitment to the unique nature of “hybrid” leadership. Achieving success in such roles requires a relatively rare combination of skills and attributes. Therefore, it is important that such leaders are competitively selected from a robust candidate pool based on explicit job-related criteria.

12

Provide teacher leaders with training and ongoing support focused on specific job responsibilities, such as leading collaborative teams or conducting formal observations to provide instructional feedback.

13

Create and protect release time. Teacher leaders need sufficient, dedicated release time daily and weekly to fulfill their specific job responsibilities. Moreover, it takes time for teacher leaders to develop the relationships, trust, and credibility necessary to have maximum impact on classroom practices and student learning. Leaders must give new investments in teacher leadership time to pay off, rather than expecting big results after only one year.

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

Principals set the tone and direction for their school's leadership team. They must balance varied and often evolving priorities and audiences, from students and families to teachers and the local community. A school principal's vision and leadership are essential to the success of every teacher and student that comes to school each day, and the most effective principals tend to exhibit similar traits.

14

Expect principals to be instructional leaders. They need to create, revise, or sustain a school vision of excellence and equity for all students, and instruction must be at the center. Principals have to effectively communicate the “why” behind the strategic priorities, monitor progress, celebrate successes, make strategic adjustments, and support collective ownership of school strategic priorities and goals. They must be able to analyze data, prioritize student and teacher needs, and make tough student-centered decisions, including on course schedules and teacher assignments and responsibilities. Every initiative should tie back to instruction.

15

Develop principals who can create and/or utilize a leadership team structure that builds leader capacity to recognize instructional rigor, support teacher effectiveness, and make decisions that lead to student success. Leadership team structures are driven by student and teacher data and inform action steps. To successfully lead instructional teams, principals must strategically develop their own leadership skills, as well as the skills of other campus leaders, through professional development opportunities.

16

Provide support and coaching for principals. Principals are lead learners. They need feedback and guidance from district leaders through a research-based leadership framework to grow their leadership skills. Using this framework both as a reflective tool for principals to examine their own practice and as the basis for robust feedback allows principals to hone in on the central mission: to improve teaching and learning.



DISTRICT LEADERSHIP

Strong leadership at the district level results in a robust system of educator support that can ultimately improve student achievement across multiple schools and grade levels. Support for the implementation of any new educator development initiative at the district level is essential and can go a long way to drive success at the school level.

17

Create and communicate a vision and framework for rigorous instruction, and set strong expectations for implementing it. In order to achieve the vision, districts must set ambitious goals and monitor ongoing progress. Success will grow over time, building collective efficacy across all the schools in the district. District leaders have to communicate and support schools in implementing a clear and coherent instructional framework that encompasses all instructional initiatives into a cohesive whole.

18

Reposition the district instructional staff to create significant support for principals and schools. Districts should dissolve silos across departments and bring teams together around topics such as curriculum, assessment, school improvement, accountability, human resources, and federal programs to align support for schools. Districts need to redefine instructional roles at the district office so that the majority of principal supervisors' time is spent actually coaching principals and school leaders to improve teaching and learning.

19

Make strategic use of existing resources to fund the instructional vision, priorities, and support systems necessary for schools to improve teaching and learning. Even when dedicated state or federal funds are not available, thoughtful use of current resources can assure funding for the instructional vision and priorities. Budgeting practices – such as aligning general fund dollars to instructional priorities, implementing a robust analysis of return on investment to determine which initiatives to continue funding, and using collective decision-making to strategically braid federal resources – can help develop a robust budget to support the district's key objectives.

20

Examine teacher and principal compensation structures to identify strategic opportunities to differentiate compensation based on added responsibilities and job performance. Factors including teacher leadership roles, teacher and leader effectiveness measures, improved student achievement outcomes, and hard-to-staff schools and subjects are all considerations that can contribute to the design of strategic, differentiated compensation systems that will ultimately help the district attract and retain quality educators. ●



One of NIET's values as an organization is continuous improvement, as we constantly strive for a higher level of performance in all of our work. We know our partners do the same. NIET is grateful for all that we have accomplished – and learned – over the last 20 years.