

Founder's Award Finalists

Even with the unusual routines of the 2020-21 school year, one annual milestone for NIET stayed the same: celebrating great teachers and leaders at our national conference with the NIET Founder's Award.

Founder's Award recipients are selected by NIET based on their efforts to make instructional excellence the cornerstone of school improvement, plan for regular professional learning focused on real-time needs of

teachers and students, create a culture of collaboration and reflection, and leverage teacher leaders and administrators to drive student growth.

This year's Founder's Award finalists showed they continued to prioritize instructional excellence to improve student achievement as they adapted to virtual instruction and the challenges of the pandemic by continuing to support their school community. Their stories were a highlight in our year.

2021 Founder's Award \$50,000 Grand Prize Winner

Douglas MacArthur Elementary School,
Perry Township Schools, Indiana

Star Hardimon, who was principal at Douglas MacArthur before transitioning to a district leadership role this fall, credits school and district support for helping her lead Douglas MacArthur to an A state rating through developing her teachers as learners, challenging their thinking, continuously analyzing data, and getting results. Douglas MacArthur, like schools across Perry Township, has experienced a significant shift in demographics due to an influx of refugees, mostly from Myanmar. The school's English Language Learner student population has increased from 24% to over 50%, and its eligibility of students for free or reduced-price lunch has jumped from 53% to 73%. Hardimon, who became principal during the transition, spearheaded the change in how educators engaged students, delivered instruction, and used data to inform decisions.

Her whole-team approach to instructional leadership resulted in students performing well above state



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Star Hardimon
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averages in English language arts (56%) and math (65%), compared to the state average of 48% in both subjects, according to 2018-19 data (the most recent available data at the time of the Founder's Award). Similarly, the 2019-

20 WIDA 2.0 assessment shows that more than 55% of English Language Learners are exceeding targets to meet the state's long-term goals for language development, compared to the state average of over 30%.

Q&A with Star Hardimon

What is the biggest strength you saw from your educators at Douglas MacArthur?

Educators at Douglas MacArthur developed a keen focus on what students need for success. We no longer talked about what we “think;” it became about the evidence, the data, the reflection on what went well, and next steps. Teachers also recognized the benefit of creating an environment of risk-taking to support critical thinking.

What do you think is the biggest strategy that Douglas MacArthur adopted that helped to accelerate student achievement?

Along with our focus on critical-thinking strategies, Douglas MacArthur also strengthened our processes for student accountability and our work of intentionally focusing on students performing in the bottom 25%.

What did you learn from your teachers and students during the pandemic?

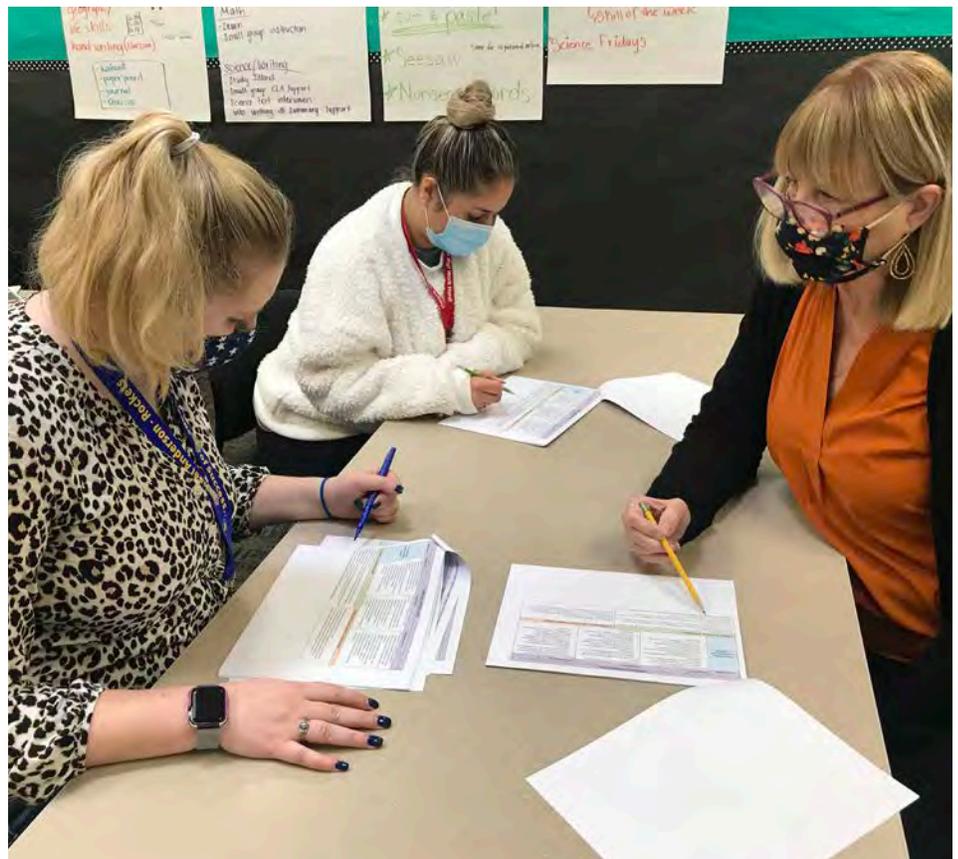
What I learned is that they are resilient but need transparency. Balance is critical. We must find the balance between relationships and academics, even if that balance looks different daily, weekly, monthly. Social-emotional wellness for both students and staff are critical to a healthy school environment.

2021 Founder’s Award \$10,000 Finalist

**Michael Anderson School, Avondale
Elementary School District, Arizona**

Michael Anderson School serves a dynamic group of 840 students, of whom 89% are Hispanic, a quarter are English Language Learners, and all are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Having led the school since the beginning of the NIET partnership, Principal Lori Goslar has seen the growth of teachers and students firsthand as they have made the NIET rubric — a comprehensive, research-based set of exemplary instructional practices — their own. Since that time, the growth in teachers’ skills each year has led to gains in student achievement: The percentages of students testing proficient in English language arts and math have more than doubled, and the school’s state rating has jumped from a C to a high B.

“The structures of NIET and its rubrics serve as a timeless avenue that has built teaching, learning, and results,” Goslar said. “We have continued to grow, anchored to the rubric in every way. It creates a



pathway for teachers, students, and families. NIET has taken me from a procedural leader to a conceptual leader aware of continuing possibilities

that have resulted in positive outcomes and celebrations for me and my team of career teachers, leadership team members, and students.”

2021 Founder's Award \$10,000 Finalist

North DeSoto High School,
DeSoto Parish Schools, Louisiana

Through building a strong culture of support and high expectations at the school and district levels, DeSoto Parish has developed and retained effective teachers and has drawn talent to the district. North DeSoto High School Principal Tammie Phillips, a 25-year educator, is one such leader. She and her leadership team are working to maintain the school's A state rating while encouraging teachers to take their practice to the next level. Phillips finds it highly beneficial to perform "learning walks" with colleagues to observe how students are engaging with teachers and the content in real time and identify strengths and strategies to reinforce. Students are also being well-prepared for college and career, earning A state ratings in



ACT mastery, graduation, and strength of diploma.

"NIET's processes have fostered so much reflection in me," said Phillips.

"They've allowed me to think about what I've done, how I've grown, and most importantly, how I can foster growth in teachers."

2021 Founder's Award \$10,000 Finalist

Prairie View Elementary School,
Goshen Community Schools, Indiana

Serving all students is at the cornerstone of Prairie View's work, and Principal Donna Wiktorowski has delved deeply into NIET structures to develop a coaching model that builds teachers' skill sets and addresses educational inequities and challenges. The school serves a majority-minority population, with more than 25% of students classified as English Language Learners. As a result of educators' commitment, students are meeting and exceeding proficiency targets at higher percentages than state averages because all teachers are consistently supported, valued, and committed to excellent instruction.

"TAP makes it possible to include practicing teachers in setting goals, managing data, and taking the lead to implement the best practices we want to see in every classroom," said



Wiktorowski. Having the structure and time for an instructional leadership team to support and build trust with

teachers has had a "significant impact" on her effectiveness as a leader and the achievement of the school as a whole.