A great deal has been accomplished by the many partners of NIET since the pandemic caused schools to take most of learning online. We have seen districts and schools refine technology skills, transform rubrics and lessons for every modality, restructure teacher collaboration and feedback, and strengthen partnerships with students and families to promote ownership of learning. Yet while the education landscape has changed significantly as a result of the uncertainties of the pandemic, educator effectiveness remains constant, in fact, the guiding force that unifies schools around a clear vision. The courage and commitment of educators in all settings to not only stay the course, but exceed expectations is the greatest proof that striving to achieve excellence matters.

**Excellence matters in districts** whose leaders prioritize funding and support for educator effectiveness, establish a vision and expectations, and share best practices for everyone to grow. Led by Superintendent Dr. Saul Hinojosa, rural Somerset Independent School District, Texas, is a shining example of using these principles to drive meaningful, sustained improvements in student achievement. We honored educators and officials with the 2020-21 NIET District Award of Excellence for Educator Effectiveness for their long-standing work changing the trajectory of young people’s lives. “Integrating teacher leaders works,” Saul shared, “and the proof is in the results.” Given all that the district has accomplished, it is no surprise that Somerset was one of the few Texas districts singled out for showing notable growth in last spring’s state assessments.

**Excellence matters in states** that place a strategic focus on teacher leadership and support. Stimulus funds provide a powerful opportunity to support and retain effective educators and accelerate student learning. NIET partnerships funded by the Teacher and School Leader (TSL) Incentive Program and Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) Grant Program — now in Texas and South Carolina — make it possible to attract and develop larger numbers of educators to prepare students for success. This success serves as a model for others. These are a few examples highlighted in this report, representing innovations that inspire us daily. I encourage you to consider how they can influence your work in your pursuit in building educator excellence and advancing student learning.

Lowell Milken