



# Working FROM Within

## *NIET'S APPROACH TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT*

**SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**, at its core, is about improving instruction. Yet, the context and culture of each school requires a unique approach to improving instruction that is specific to its needs and has buy-in from its teaching staff. As NIET continues to evolve, it has expanded its spectrum of supports for schools that are in need of rapid improvement or profound transformation. While some districts, such as Premont Independent School District (Premont ISD) in Texas, have chosen to adopt a holistic system of professional learning led by teacher leaders, other schools have asked NIET to start where they are and work within their existing professional learning structures and strategies.

In fall 2018, NIET began piloting another approach to school improvement in Knox County, Tennessee, and the Orangeburg Consolidated School District 5 in South Carolina. There, NIET staff has worked with the current

instructional leaders, rather than implementing new roles and structures, to change school culture and raise the level of instruction across classrooms. While this new approach may be initially different from the TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement, our staff has found the coaching they are providing has planted the seeds from which strong systems of professional learning can grow. No matter the approach, NIET supports four key elements that lead to school success: Instructional excellence, reflective culture, collaborative learning, and collective leadership.

### **SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT UNDER TAP**

Introduced in 1999, the TAP System has built a track record of success as a comprehensive and intensive approach to strengthening teaching and raising student achievement in underperforming schools. After Premont

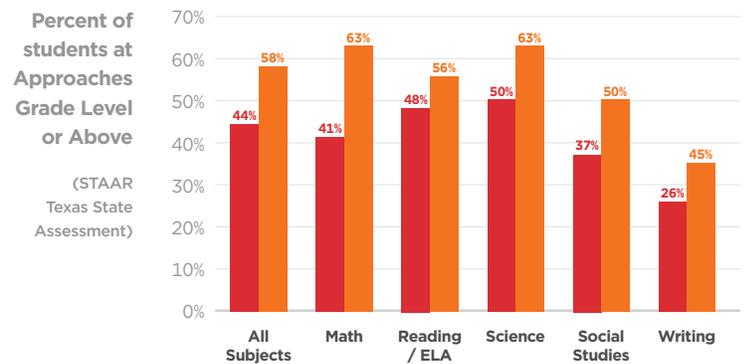
ISD had been on the shutdown list for a number of years, its leaders chose NIET in 2014 to help them implement a new system of professional learning with the hopes of profoundly changing their trajectory. As part of their improvement plan, both schools in the district adopted teacher leader roles, agreed to significant upfront training and coordinated weekly professional learning meetings. NIET trained teacher leaders, or “demonstration teachers,” and worked with them as the key lever for building school culture and strong instruction. Premont teachers have their professional learning led by teacher leaders who test concepts and strategies in classrooms before taking the strategy to teachers. This structure for teacher learning increases buy-in and builds a culture of collaboration.

When conducting walk-throughs and observations, demonstration teachers facilitate discussion around student learning, rather than focusing on instructional deficits. This communicated to teachers that walk-throughs were meant to be supportive rather than correctional. In Premont, principals were given support in facilitating the demonstration teachers' learning, setting goals and monitoring progress. As the structures took hold and were embraced by teachers, Premont began to make impressive strides in student achievement. By 2016, Premont ISD had reached “met standard” status and has continued to steadily improve in the years since. In the round of school letter grades for 2017-2018, Premont received a “B” letter grade for overall performance and an “A” grade for school progress.

## NIET'S NEW APPROACH TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

While supporting teacher leaders who guide a structured system for professional learning has been NIET's traditional approach to building effective instruction, this is only effective to the extent that a school has built a collaborative school culture to foster a robust system of professional learning. However, this is not always the case in schools identified for improvement, which often lack the time, teacher buy-in and capacity to institute broad new initiatives. For one, schools selected for improvement often face short and urgent timelines to move the needle on school improvement. According to NIET Director of Training Dr. Ann Shaw, “When the stakes

### Premont ISD Students Test Scores Improve Across Subjects Between 2013 and 2018



are high, supporting the classroom teacher through professional development and support become urgent. We take a focused approach to have the greatest impact at the classroom level.”

Schools on an improvement list can also show general skepticism or resistance to new initiatives and strategies. Most schools identified for improvement have been under pressure to improve for years and often have tried a plethora of strategies without seeing much success. This produces so-called “reform fatigue,” which can limit the success of big initiatives and new structures. As NIET Trainer Natalie Szakacs explains, “If there is not a culture of collaboration, I can't change the trajectory of that school's performance.” Finally, perhaps the biggest challenge principals and instructional leaders face in chronically underperforming schools is that they have more challenges than time and resources to overcome them. Adding new initiatives to their already full plates can often be counterproductive and even lead to declines in school performance.

When these factors are at play, instead of offering significant modifications to a school's existing structures and strategies, NIET has found greater success by working within a school to empower its leaders through hands-on, job-embedded coaching and support. By supporting existing leadership, NIET helps instructional leaders find coherence in their current initiatives and builds their capacity to lead their own success. Simply stated, Szakacs assures her principals and coaches that “I am coaching so you won't need me.” In the early stages of support, NIET helps schools build excellent instruction and a reflective culture that paves the way for collaborative learning and collective leadership.

# School Improvement in Action

In fall 2018, NIET began working with principals and instructional leaders in six schools in Knox County, Tennessee, and Mellichamp Elementary in the Orangeburg 5 District in South Carolina. All schools needed to see rapid improvement that built on their ongoing investments in professional learning. NIET staff partnered with each school to help leaders diagnose barriers teachers faced to delivering effective instruction and used coaching conversations and schoolwide instructional strategies to create a strong school culture around a common language and goals.

## LEARNING WALKS TO UNDERSTAND EXCELLENT INSTRUCTION

NIET staff began by taking the school's instructional leaders on learning walks to train them on how to analyze the quality and depth of instruction. NIET grounds learning walks and follow-up in reflective questions that guide the principal's focus towards student engagement and academic growth to determine instructional impact. For example, principals are asked questions such as:

- Was the teacher or the students doing more of the thinking and problem-solving in the classroom?
- How did students respond to the teacher's instructional strategies?
- What kind of student work was produced during the lesson?
- Did the lesson align to the rigor and depth of the lesson's objective?

Observing and diagnosing areas for instructional improvement are only the first part of the process. Once they understand how to observe effective instruction, most principals and instructional leaders already have a large toolkit of strategies they can give to teachers. However, it's critical that instructional leaders understand how to individualize coaching for each teacher. This is done by framing instructional strategies around what approaches best motivate that teacher while also addressing his or her beliefs in student potential. It's through these coaching interactions that instructional

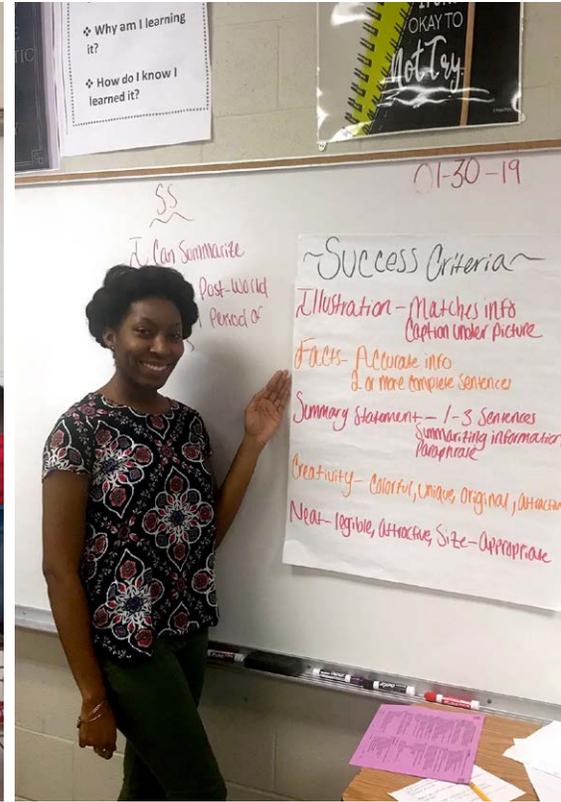
leaders reshape school culture, which leads to a sense of collective efficacy across the school building, then to significant learning gains.

## COACHING TO BUILD REFLECTIVE CULTURE

Changing school culture is often the most difficult part of school improvement. In chronically underperforming schools, many of the teachers have been working hard for years, some to the point of exhaustion. Yet given the considerable academic, personal and physical needs of their students, they haven't seen the needle move much. All this effort with little to show for it is disheartening to teachers and can unintentionally create a culture of low collective efficacy. Shaw has seen this problem firsthand. "Sometimes without realizing it we often rob our students from doing the thinking and problem-solving in the lesson because we may think the material is too difficult. Doing so takes away the opportunity for students to engage in material at their level."

In working with the whole staff and individual teachers, the principal must use coaching conversations to overcome any low expectations that teachers are holding for students. To facilitate this, NIET helps school leaders to connect coaching conversations on instructional strategies to one of John Hattie and Klaus Zierer's "10 Mindframes for Visible Learning." For example, if a principal sees or hears a teacher holding low expectations for students, he or she may ask the teacher to reflect on the extent to which "I give and help students understand feedback and I interpret and act on feedback given to me." If the teacher isn't asking for or receiving feedback, it may be because the teacher doesn't think students are capable of meaningfully engaging in their own learning. By asking the teacher to engage in this mindframe and seek student feedback in the lessons, the teacher will see students respond in a positive way. This, in turn, rebuilds the teacher's belief that the students can learn.

To further increase their effectiveness in coaching, instructional leaders need to understand the varying instructional motivations of the teachers in their



building. When coaching on a particular instructional strategy, teachers respond best when the strategy is framed in a way that resonates with their motivations for teaching. While there are many ways to motivate teachers, they will usually want to know at least one of the following when discussing instructional strategy:

- How the strategy will help them improve scores—either their own effectiveness on the rubric or student achievement.** Teachers with this motivation are most likely to respond to strategies that are rooted in success criteria or an instructional rubric, which serves as a guide for them to understand how to score well.
  - If what they are doing is “right” or “wrong” according to the research.** Teachers with this motivation need to know if the strategy they are being asked to carry out is validated and justified by research.
  - How and when they should apply a certain strategy.** Teachers with this motivation may need a model of the approach to see it in action so they can best understand how to apply it themselves.
- How the strategy benefits all students.** Teachers with this motivation need to hear what kind of student learning and outcomes the strategy should produce.

Understanding the instructional motivations and needs of teachers is especially important for communicating and supporting schoolwide learning strategies. The teachers that fall into each of these categories make up their own subculture in the building. Ultimately, the overall culture of a building is the sum of these subcultures and it's the task of the instructional leaders to bring these subcultures into harmony with each other to create a broad, unified school culture. If a principal can't coach one of these teacher learner profiles, they are likely missing a number of teachers in their building. Szakacs says this balance is “the foundation for school culture: Teachers trust their leaders to the extent that they have made decisions on instructional strategies that support each of these motivations.” To help school leaders support each learner type, NIET staff asks school leaders during learning walks to make observations that correspond to each learner type so that they are prepared to coach all teacher learning styles. Coaches

notice the difference. "I finally realize what coaching is about," said a Knox County instructional coach. "Before partnering with NIET, I had all these relationships where I would go in and tell these teachers what to do, yet nothing would change."

## TAKING OWNERSHIP OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

The strong support and reinforcement from NIET help build small early wins among the teaching staff that begin to shift the culture. These small wins often happen around the same time that schools leaders are feeling comfortable with their new coaching approach and taking full ownership of their instructional leadership. Each win gives them more confidence, deepening their commitment and setting in motion a virtuous cycle of improvement, which transforms school culture and increases collective efficacy.

"I can provide my students greater opportunities for engagement."

**Mellichamp Teacher**

As coaches continue to focus coaching conversations on student work, they implicitly model a common language around instruction that teachers begin to adopt. In only a few months of work in Knox County and Mellichamp Elementary, gaining this common language and knowing that everyone is working to improve have opened the doors to new teacher collaboration. Teachers have started meeting to deconstruct standards, discuss ways to give more thinking and problem-solving time to students, and create standards-aligned success criteria for student work. "Through this analysis with my colleagues, I have realized there are activities in my lesson plan I can take out that really are not as beneficial in helping my students master the lesson's objective," said a veteran teacher at Mellichamp. "By making a tweak to the plan I can provide my students greater opportunities for engagement." These critical revelations have not only led to more

effective instruction, but are also celebrated by the staff in the building and have contributed to a renewed positive and productive school culture.

## SUSTAINING AND EXPANDING IMPROVEMENT THROUGH COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

The schools' trajectories are having a ripple effect in their communities. The improvement strategies in Mellichamp have been recognized by Orangeburg 5 leaders and are shaping whole district strategy and trainings for leaders. The transformation from "priority" to model school has only bolstered Mellichamp's confidence and has motivated staff to keep up their good work.

These schools are also potentially on a path to adding additional instructional leadership roles and structures for professional learning, which are strong tools for sustaining learning gains. As teachers establish a common instructional language and begin to see the fruits of their labor, they often begin to ask for greater supports, which opens the door to embedding a defined system of professional learning.

Already in one semester, Knox and Mellichamp have seen teacher collaboration blossom. As their culture of collaboration continues to grow, they may choose to elevate teacher leaders to instructional leadership roles or expand their time spent in structured professional learning communities.

Whether working within existing structures and initiatives like in Orangeburg and Knox or bringing in a new infrastructure for professional learning in Premont ISD, the core focus of NIET's work is helping build school cultures that make student learning the focus of all instructional strategies. Once a school has established excellent instruction and a reflective culture, they are prepared to engage in collaborative learning and collective leadership that allows for profound student learning gains. While NIET realizes there are different ways to approach school improvement, our mission remains the same: ensuring that every student has an excellent teacher. ■