

Improving Teaching and Learning in Rural Arkansas Districts

2016

Impact of the Teacher Incentive Fund

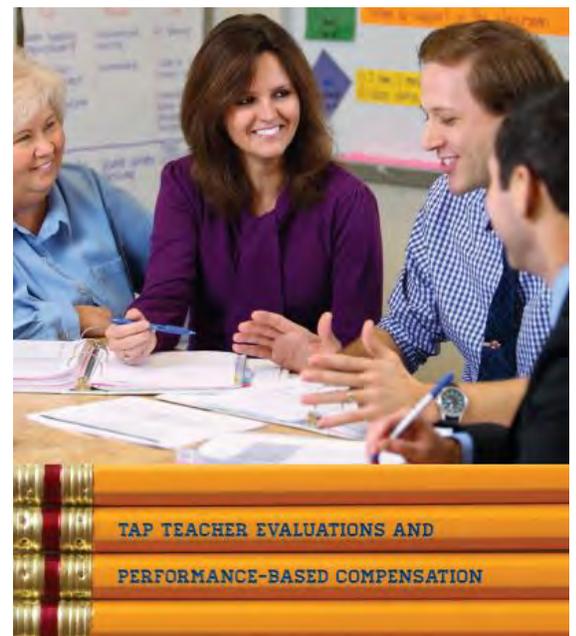
Two rural school districts in Arkansas received funds from the federal Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) in 2010 to increase the effectiveness of teachers and school leaders in their high need schools. The challenge was substantial, as the Lincoln School District competed with significantly higher base salaries in neighboring areas, and the geographic isolation of the Cross County School District made recruiting very difficult. Limited financial resources presented obstacles to innovation in both districts. District leaders also wanted to better support teachers in implementing a number of district priorities including STEM education and project based learning.

The Arkansas TIF grant enabled school and district leaders in Cross County and Lincoln School Districts to create systems that supported ongoing, continuous improvement for teachers, and reintroduce performance measurement as a key tool in describing and improving classroom instruction. In partnership with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, the districts used the TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement to aligned student achievement goals, teacher professional development, principal leadership development, and educator evaluation. Schools increased teacher and school leader effectiveness and student learning as a result of these connections.



The Arkansas TIF-3 grant was implemented across all the schools in these districts -- Cross County Elementary and Cross County High School and Lincoln Elementary, Lincoln Middle, and Lincoln High School. In each year of the grant, an average of 139 teachers were involved.

This TIF 3 grant has helped poor and disadvantaged students in these rural high need districts to increase their academic achievement by increasing the number of effective teachers in the classroom. TIF has done this by supporting improvements in knowledge and skills in existing faculty and by enabling the districts to better recruit effective educators using recruitment incentives.



TAP TEACHER EVALUATIONS AND
PERFORMANCE-BASED COMPENSATION

Increasing Retention of Effective Teachers

"Everyone is on the same page here. That consistency helps me to know what I can do to improve my students' achievement. Plus, it translates to a financial reward as well—it's nice to think that I'm in control of my classroom and my career." – Suzi Pleimann, Career Teacher in Lincoln Schools

By the final year of the grant, schools were demonstrating an 89% retention rate of teachers identified as effective and 100% of the principals reported that TAP enhanced their ability to recruit teachers who were likely to be effective.

Increasing Student Achievement Gains

Student achievement was measured using SAS Value-Added methodology, based on student performance on state-administered assessments. The school-wide value added score can range from 1 to 5, with 3 equal to approximately one year overall growth. The growth target for this grant was set at 3.1 for each year, to demonstrate achieving more than one year's growth on average across all five school sites. The target was met and exceeded in three of the four years of the grant with mean school-wide value added scores in those three years of 4.2, 3.5, and 4. The percent of students scoring Proficient or Advanced on state assessments grew from 66% prior to TIF to 71% by the end of the grant.



Articulating a Vision for Instructional Improvement

The districts have articulated a common vision of instructional improvement that is grounded in a clearly and well-defined set of teaching performance standards. Teachers share common learning opportunities and a common language focused on student work and student needs. Teachers receive support through a meaningful and reflective evaluation process. Teachers are rewarded based on their performance and the performance of their students. Improved student achievement, teacher effectiveness, and principal effectiveness are the results.



Aligning Compensation to Performance

Both districts have reformed their teacher and principal compensation systems. Principals are able to earn addendums to their base salary based on three components: student growth in their school, their building leadership score as indicated in the Leader Excellence and Development rubric, and their leadership ability based on leadership team observation scores. Teachers are able to earn addendums to their base salary based on new roles and responsibilities as master or mentor teachers, as well as on their instructional performance and the performance of their students.

Ongoing Professional Learning

"I've seen a lot of education tools and resources over the years, but nothing has ever been as comprehensive as this. From preparation, to student success and teacher growth, this has it all. Not to mention the fact that it works—statistics can't be ignored." – Sarah Simmons, Mentor Teacher in Lincoln Schools

All five of the schools in this project have implemented and sustained job-embedded professional learning opportunities (clusters), facilitated by teacher leaders, which focus on specific student areas of need, as well as teacher weaknesses identified through observation and evaluations. In cluster, teachers are provided new learning to be implemented in the classroom and reinforced by intentional follow-up support.



