



CEO'S CORNER

A Conversation with Dr. Gary Stark



Dr. Gary Stark serves as president and CEO of the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching. Through his leadership, NIET has expanded TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement in a number of ways, including forging partnerships with universities to prepare teacher candidates, increasing a focus on STEM teachers, additional funding for TAP projects, and new technologies and training resources to better support TAP schools. Building on the effectiveness of and high demand for the TAP System, Stark led the launch of the Best Practices Center in 2011 to provide additional services, support and solutions to districts and states that are developing and implementing new educator evaluation systems focused on improving educator effectiveness. Stark sat down with the communications staff to reflect on the history of NIET's groundbreaking initiatives and lay out what's in store for the future.

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The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) was established in 2005 to manage and support the exponential growth of the TAP System, which was introduced in 1999. This was before terms like “performance-based evaluation” and “job-embedded support” were mainstream in education. Now they are part of the national lexicon, partly due to TAP and Founder Lowell Milken’s vision. Could you reflect on the increasing adoption of these reforms and the most significant milestones in TAP’s growth as a result?

TAP is fundamentally based on a growth mindset. It recognizes that in order to improve student achievement and meet higher goals we need to improve instruction, and teachers need support in doing that within the context of their classrooms. Support for instructional improvement has to be an integral part of the school’s goals, structure and budget. It isn’t just about identifying and supporting weak teachers. It is about taking teaching as a profession to new heights, and invigorating and inspiring all teachers, particularly our best teachers, and our newest teachers. And it is about putting teacher leaders in the center of these reforms, in partnership with administrators. With more than 37 states implementing new teacher evaluation and support systems, the experiences of educators in TAP schools and districts have become highly relevant to state and national conversations.

When you think back ten years, these concepts were discussed, but not implemented or operationalized—today, NIET is doing both.

TAP has been a part of creating a new more positive vision for the profession. Perhaps the most important role we played is that while others were talking about these concepts, we were out working with educators to apply them on the ground. With our school and district partners, we were able to illustrate what was possible and, equally as important, we were able to dispel myths. For example, when researchers made the case that teachers do not improve their skills after about five years, we could show that if you had effective professional development, teachers at any level of experience would demonstrate growth. When decision-makers made the case that teacher leaders would not be accurate, unbiased observers of other teachers’ practice, we had the data to prove them wrong. When just about everyone said that giving teachers and principals the opportunity to earn performance-based compensation would destroy collegiality, we had the feedback from thousands of educators showing that this was not the case if performance-based compensation was part of a system that supported improvement.

When you think about the comprehensive nature of

TAP, it seems non-controversial today, with lots of people talking about the need for comprehensive human capital management systems. However, this is a relatively recent development. It used to be that each of these elements were driven independently; evaluation had nothing to do with pay or support. Professional development had nothing to do with teacher needs. Compensation had no link to job effectiveness or to taking on additional roles and responsibilities. As a result, there were conflicting signals about goals and priorities. Now, while there remain huge challenges in this area, there is a recognition that we need to think about systems and incentives being aligned and directed to our most important goals.

In terms of milestones, some of the most important are our partnerships with state policy leaders who are innovating in the development of effective ways to improve classroom instruction. The states have each approached TAP in their own context, but one common theme is that they have been able to steadily increase teacher effectiveness and student academic achievement growth. States like South Carolina, Indiana, Arizona and Tennessee have used TAP to drive innovations in the state around teacher evaluation, teacher preparation and professional development and the development of career pathways as well as their approaches to turn around high-need but low-performing schools. Iowa is another example of a state that took lessons from TAP and other efforts on the ground and applied them to a new teacher leadership and compensation system. These efforts moved forward in part through the work of TAP educators who participated in policy discussions and legislative hearings in their own states and, in some cases, in other states.

One of our most pivotal developments was our move to develop a comprehensive educator effectiveness portal, or Web-based platform, that houses our training resources, video libraries, data management tools and evaluators’ certification modules. This technology allowed for more effective and timely access to extensive resources for all members of the organization, especially the teachers and principals. NIET was a national leader in the innovation of using video models

to define exemplary instruction within the context of an evaluation system, as well as providing a low-cost, comprehensive Web-based system to schools and districts around the country. And that innovation has put us ahead of the curve in supporting a range of states that have come to us for support as they develop and implement new statewide evaluation systems that, of course, rely extensively on technology.

Approval of new federal and state resources were also key milestones driving the expansion of TAP. In 2006, the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) represented the first federal effort to direct funds to improving educator effectiveness using performance measures and compensation. Since its inception, TIF has had broad bipartisan support from

Democrats and Republicans, and was awarded another \$289 million for Fiscal Year 2014. TIF reflects the key elements of TAP and incorporates its lessons. In addition, the federal government recently created a new program called Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) with a portion of Title II funds. SEED supports innovation in teacher preparation, both pre-service and in-service. This new competitive grant program also strongly reflects the elements of TAP. It will support the integration of the TAP Teaching Standards into teacher preparation programs, and the placement of teacher candidates and new teachers in TAP schools. Two of the six new SEED grants this year were awarded to NIET in partnership with Arizona State University and Texas Tech University.

2

In 2011, NIET formed the Best Practices Center to work with schools, districts and states pursuing the development of their own systems of teacher leadership, professional development, teacher evaluation, and performance-based compensation. What drove the creation of the Best Practices Center, and how are the services different from those you provide to TAP schools?

As demand escalated for TAP's proven instructional tools in diverse districts, we realized that there was a need for us to serve a broader base. By establishing the Best Practices Center, we can provide districts with the customized technical assistance to best fit their goals. In addition to help with evaluation systems, the BPC is

also involved in providing a range of support in other areas. We anticipate this work will continue to grow in the coming years. And we will continue to use the experiences of TAP schools to illustrate why it is so critical to think about the full system of evaluation, support, compensation and career opportunity.

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Tennessee and Texas were among the first states to collaborate with the Best Practices Center. Could you explain their projects and goals?

In 2010, leaders in Tennessee decided to revamp the state's educator evaluation system to more accurately measure teacher performance, and to provide educators with feedback and support to improve their practice over time. Like other teacher evaluation systems across the country, the old system was based on infrequent observations, without research-based standards, bearing no clear link to student achievement growth, and offering little useful feedback to teachers.

The Tennessee First to the Top Act required, beginning in the 2011–12 school year, annual evaluation of all teachers and principals with 50% based on multiple measures of student achievement growth and 50% based on multiple classroom observations of teachers by trained and certified evaluators.

Tennessee Education Commissioner Kevin Huffman said that the state selected the TAP Rubric because of its

“strong performance in the field test with teachers and principals, but also because TAP was able to provide the level of training and support that we need for the first year of implementation.”

Last fall when the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) results were released, Tennessee had the largest one-year gain ever made by a state. We believe that this illustrates that when you set clear and achievable goals, and give teachers information that enables them to improve their instruction, they rise to the challenge.

In Texas, NIET is working with the state on the development of a new teacher evaluation system. This work is ongoing, and we are excited about the potential of working with large numbers of educators in Texas to create a more accurate and useful evaluation system that supports instructional improvement.

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What is important to know about NIET and what makes NIET a good partner? Specifically, how does NIET work with schools, districts and states to develop their teacher quality reform plans?

I believe it is important to know that NIET is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that pursues a mission to increase educator effectiveness. As I mentioned earlier, we have strategically identified two signature initiatives: TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement and the NIET Best Practices Center as our means to support a cross-section of schools, districts and states. We have a history and commitment of service to teachers, principals and schools around the country. We have developed a unique set of resources and expertise that I believe is unmatched in this field. We are equipped with a diverse staff from education and business—combined with a broad coalition of school practitioners—and guided by an equally committed board and senior advisors.

Based on the knowledge and capability gained from a decade of on-the-ground expertise with TAP, we have proven results and leadership in educator effectiveness—including services such as evaluator training and certification, development and design of appraisal tools and instructional rubrics, grant writing, and an array of materials, videos, and resources within our Web-based training platform, as well as customized educator effectiveness portals for districts and states.

In all of our projects, NIET has been an active thought-partner in the conceptualization of how educator effectiveness initiatives can support district and state education goals. The lessons learned from all of the components of the TAP System have been instrumental in the planning phases with states, districts and schools. We are able to think through how things will play out on the ground and help them to anticipate and respond to developments along the way.

From an implementation standpoint, NIET has excelled at designing high-quality, interactive training experiences for participants while always ensuring these are led by a highly-qualified and experienced trainer. This is critical, as the effectiveness of education reforms are driven by the quality of their design and, equally important, the quality of their implementation. Success over time depends heavily on creating a structure that can adapt to change and be constantly improved.

We understand how important it is for teachers and principals to fully understand and support the proposed changes. We spend a great deal of time at the outset ensuring that both the people leading the change and the people implementing the change are well-prepared. Part of this work is facilitating the development of a school team that has the skills to work together to define goals, create plans for meeting those goals, monitor and make course corrections, and has the trust of the staff. The National TAP Conference and our TAP Summer Institutes are wonderful opportunities to learn more about NIET and what we do to support schools, districts and states.

Educators with direct experience implementing educator effectiveness reforms with success are the cornerstone of NIET. Our expertise, along with a network of trainers and master teachers across the country, makes us well-equipped to provide the support districts need to be effective. We have been fortunate in the strength, commitment and vision of our partners. Our collaboration with our TAP colleagues in schools, districts and states in pursuit of results for students is what makes our work so rewarding.

NIET

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Background on NIET and the TAP System

In 1999, philanthropist Lowell Milken introduced TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement, an initiative to restructure and revitalize the teaching profession. TAP's comprehensive, research-driven reform model provides a fair, transparent teacher evaluation model, continuous on-site professional development, career advancement opportunities, and differentiated compensation for teachers based on their performance in the classroom and the performance of their students. In 2005, the growth of the TAP System, along with the national focus on improving educator effectiveness, was the catalyst for the establishment of the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET), an independent 501(c)(3) public non-profit organization. Given its proven results and leadership in educator effectiveness, NIET launched its second national reform initiative with the Best Practices Center (BPC) in 2011. The Best Practices Center works with states, districts and schools considering new teacher evaluation and support systems to improve educator effectiveness and student achievement. www.niet.org