

Going BOLD-ly Into a New School Year:

How Investments in School-based Professional Learning are
Advancing Equity in Louisiana Schools



NIET

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

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The LA BOLD Project

A coalition of districts and schools serving high-need students in Louisiana are partnering with the non-profit National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) to increase equitable access to effective educators for students in high poverty schools. Through a five-year 2016 federal Teacher Incentive Fund grant, called the LA BOLD (Building On Leadership Development) project, NIET is equipping teachers across five public school districts – **DeSoto, East Feliciana, Madison, Rapides, and St. John the Baptist Parishes** – as well as six Orleans Parish charter schools: **Lord Beaconsfield Landry-Oliver Perry Walker High School, Martin Berhman Charter Academy, McDonogh 35 College Preparatory Academy, Dwight D. Eisenhower Charter School, Mary McCleod Bethune School of Literature and Technology, and Ben Franklin Elementary Mathematics and Science School.**

LA BOLD schools historically had less-experienced teachers, higher levels of teacher and principal turnover, and lower student academic achievement. Over the past four years, the LA BOLD project has increased the effectiveness of teachers and school leaders through establishing school structures for professional learning and improvement that accelerate student learning growth.

Rather than purchase all of their professional development from a variety of vendors, LA BOLD partners are developing school-based systems for professional learning that utilize two key strategies that research has demonstrated have the greatest impact on effective teaching: collaborative learning teams and classroom-based coaching by teacher leaders. **These investments are increasing teacher and principal effectiveness and leading to stronger retention and leadership development.**

Developing Teacher Leadership Roles for More Than 300 Educators

Key to LA BOLD partners' success is the identification, training and placement of teacher leaders in each school to work with principals to deliver instructional support for classroom teachers. Trained teacher leaders facilitate high-quality, weekly collaborative learning teams based on student and teacher

needs. Collaborative teams implement student learning strategies and use a cycle of rapid improvement to adjust learning strategies based on individual student work each week. The investments that districts and schools are making in school-based teams led by expert teacher leaders are producing significant improvements in the effectiveness of classroom teaching. In addition to supporting more effective classroom teaching, the structure for professional learning and coaching offers other benefits.

More Support for New Teachers

LA BOLD districts have strengthened their partnerships with educator preparation programs across the state in order to develop the skills of new teachers in working with students with greater barriers to learning and to facilitate their placement in high-need schools and classrooms. University partners are using the same research-based descriptions of strong teaching practices used by the schools. This creates continuity for new teachers between their preparation program and the expectations they must meet in their own classroom teaching, better preparing them for success working with high need students.

Five Louisiana university partners – Louisiana State University-Alexandria, Tulane University, Southeastern Louisiana University, Nicholls State University, and Northwestern State University – now use the NIET Teaching Standards in their teacher preparation programs to ensure a successful transition into in-service teaching positions in partnering districts.

As new teachers join LA BOLD schools, they benefit from weekly collaborative professional learning teams and uniquely high levels of individual coaching and support provided by teacher leaders. These teacher leadership roles allow new teachers to be coached and guided through their first few years in the classroom by a trained and highly effective mentor who is given release time to accomplish this role. The new teachers and their mentor teachers participate in professional learning together, providing a more structured and consistent system of support.

Strengthening the Teacher Pool

The opportunity to receive individual coaching, and to be part of collaborative learning teams, is highly valued by teachers and has helped to reduce teacher turnover. Through surveys and focus groups, teachers report they value professional learning that is customized to the needs of their students, as well as to their individual needs as a teacher.



Opportunities to grow and improve, through support from teacher leaders as well as principals, has increased teacher satisfaction and retention.

LA BOLD school administrators report these systems of support help recruit effective teachers, and the impact has been growing

over time. In 2018-19 approximately 81% of LA BOLD school administrators agreed with the statement, "Implementing NIET initiatives has made it easier for me to hire good teachers." The results illustrate a 10 percentage point increase from the previous year.

NIET initiatives help to hire good teachers

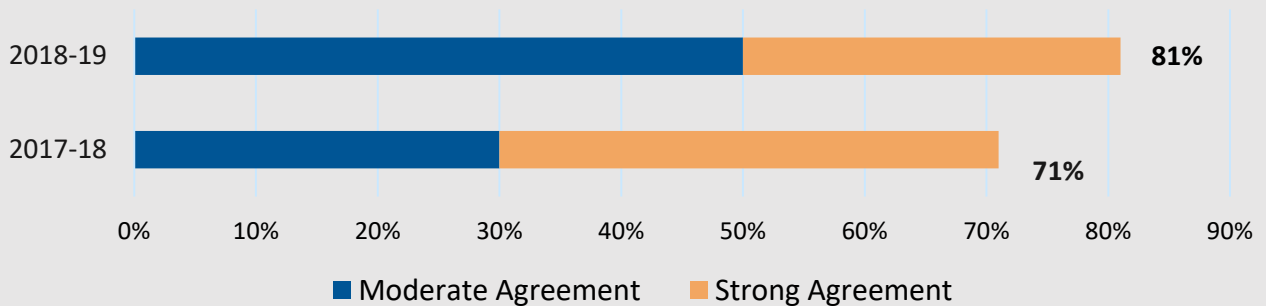


Figure 1. LA BOLD administrator-reported agreement with the statement "Implementing NIET initiatives has made it easier for me to hire good teachers"

Creating Leadership Opportunities

Through LA BOLD, more than 300 teacher leaders have been identified and trained to lead professional learning in their schools. Teacher leadership roles include "master teacher" and "mentor teacher."

Master teachers continue to teach one class but are released for 75% of their time to develop and deliver professional learning and support peer teachers through classroom-based coaching. Master teachers work closely with principals to evaluate teacher and student progress and create plans for addressing identified needs.

Mentor teachers maintain their classroom teacher roles but are released several hours each week to help lead collaborative professional learning and provide individualized coaching and feedback in classrooms. Instructional leadership roles like these provide teachers with valuable experience and create a pathway to additional leadership opportunities. Teacher leaders also play an important role in creating continuity and stability during transitions in school and district leadership.

Ensuring Students have Access to High-Quality Curriculum

An example of the impact of school-based professional learning and coaching is how districts are better able to support classroom teachers in their use of high-quality instructional materials, known in Louisiana as “Tier 1 curricula.” Teacher leaders in LA BOLD schools are providing intensive classroom coaching and follow-up support so that teachers better understand the expectations and instructional shifts required by the new curricula. Master Teacher Jessica Parker at **North DeSoto Upper Elementary School** shared her experience: “We had a structure for working together to figure out how to effectively use the curriculum to address the needs we were seeing in classrooms.”

Monthly master teacher meetings provide an ongoing opportunity for teacher leaders across schools to dig into curricular needs with attention to improving instructional

practices based on an analysis of student work. Including teacher leaders on school leadership teams provides principals with greater expertise in setting goals and creating action plans for addressing specific instructional needs and challenges.

Having teacher leaders with a direct knowledge of their colleagues and the curriculum they are teaching, as well as their students, provides a level of support that is highly responsive to student and teacher needs. This is critical given the importance of implementing Tier 1 curricula. Faydra Alexander, director of leadership development in the **Algiers Charter Schools** in New Orleans, puts it this way: “Using high-quality curricula is key to helping our students think in a more complex way and access the type of reading, writing, computing, and problem-solving they will face in college and beyond. We need to prepare our students for that.”

Developing the Skills of School Leaders

LA BOLD districts are developing the skills of principals to lead instructional leadership teams that include teacher leaders in their school. Leadership teams provide guidance and quality control to ensure that professional learning and individual coaching is having an impact on teacher practice and student learning across the school.

Participation by teacher leaders brings classroom teachers to the table and deepens the instructional expertise of the leadership team. Together, this builds the leadership pipeline and allows for the school to make decisions with all perspectives included.

Building a Leadership Pipeline

The LA BOLD grant has highlighted the importance of developing specific plans for increasing the pipeline of high-quality leaders at every district and campus. **DeSoto Parish Schools** is taking steps to expand the pool of school leaders.

This past year, district administrators identified 12 teacher leaders to serve as a part of an aspiring school leader cohort that would develop skills to become a highly effective principal. NIET supported the districts to build the cohort's expertise in foundational leadership, instructional excellence, data-driven decision making, and collaborative practices. The training built on the skills and relationships they already had gained as teacher leaders to strengthen their readiness for a principalship.

Establishing Clear Standards for Principals

In the course of this work, district leaders and principals expressed a need for a comprehensive evaluation and coaching tool for principals. They wanted a tool similar to the NIET Teaching Standards that would enable principals to reflect on their role and give evaluators a tool for providing specific, actionable feedback to principals that would help to grow new and experienced leaders in their schools. NIET drew on an extensive research base illustrating the attributes of successful school leaders, as well as its 20+ years of experience working with school leaders to improve classroom instruction, to create the NIET Principal Standards Rubric.



NIET Principal Standards Rubric

Defining excellence in school leadership across six domains

School Mission,
Vision, and Strategic
Goal Setting

Instructional
Leadership

Capacity Building

School Environment/
Community and
Campus Climate

Ethics and Integrity

School Operations/
Management

The rubric defines excellence in school leadership in six domains: school mission, vision, and strategic goal setting; instructional leadership; capacity building; school environment/community and campus climate; ethics and integrity; and school operations/management. Two LA BOLD partners, **Algiers Charter School Association** and **DeSoto Parish Schools**, piloted and then adopted the NIET Principal Standards Rubric for the 2019-20 school year. These districts provided extensive feedback from principals and district leaders during the pilot, and their experiences and recommendations helped to shape the final tool and related resources.

LA BOLD principals involved in the pilot are enthusiastic about the resource, as DeSoto principal Brittany Anderson shares: “The NIET Principal Standards Rubric is specific and defined. Not only does the rubric specifically define the elements of effective leadership necessary to positively impact

teacher growth and student achievement, but it also serves as a foundation for a detailed plan for improvement based on my specific strengths and weaknesses.”

Increasing Effectiveness of School Leaders

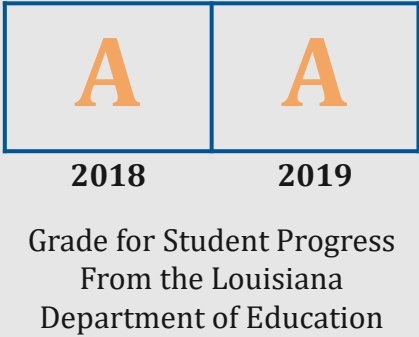
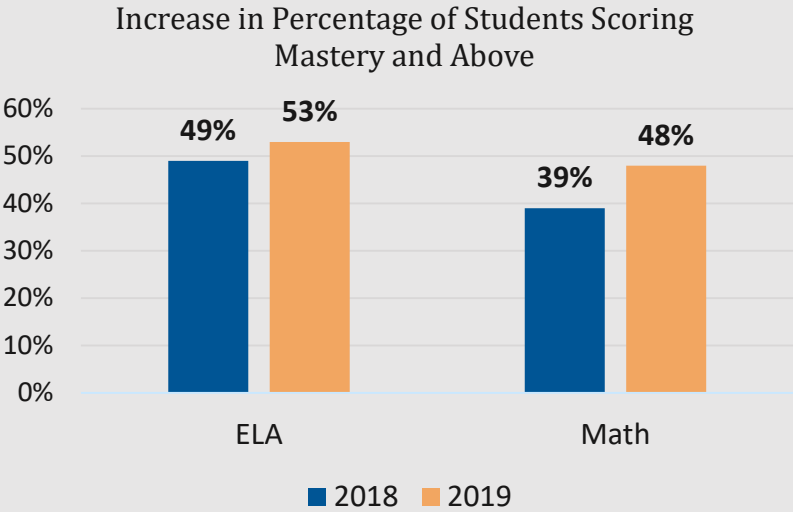
A critical element of the project is the training and engagement of district leaders and principal supervisors, along with principals. Training together on the NIET Principal Standards, for example, has built a common language and understanding of the complex elements of a principal’s job. This common understanding of the role and expectations also improved coaching and support for principals, as did the expectation that principal supervisors spend more time in the school. Through surveys and focus groups, principals and assistant principals described the increased level of training and support from these district leaders as a key factor in their success.

Annual Progress in Student Achievement Growth: Slaughter Elementary

As the effectiveness of LA BOLD school leaders and teachers has increased, student achievement has also increased. For example, at **Slaughter Elementary in East Feliciana Public Schools**, between 2018 and 2019, students scoring mastery and above increased from 49% to 53% in ELA and 39% to 48% in Math.

Specifically, third grade students increased their ELA index score by 29 points, from 65.4 to 94.5. Within the same time frame, fourth grade students moved their ELA index up by over 23 points, from 65.4 to 88.6. What's more, students with disabilities improved their index by 10.7 points, and economically disadvantaged students increased their index by 5 points.

In the measure of Student Progress, Slaughter Elementary earned an "A" letter grade from the state in 2018 and 2019, increasing its school performance score from 76.3 to 81.3.



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Students began taking ownership of their learning and individual growth and displayed confidence in their mastery of grade-level standards and daily objectives.
—Kimberly Glascock, Principal
Slaughter Elementary

Results: State Recognitions for Student Achievement Growth

DeSoto Parish Schools, Madison Parish School District, and East Feliciana Public Schools were highlighted by the Louisiana Department of Education for progress made with underserved populations during the 2018-19 school year.

In 2019, **DeSoto Parish Schools** was ranked as one of the top 10 outstanding school systems in Louisiana for overall growth for two consecutive years and growth among English language learners. Nationally, DeSoto performed in the top 4% of school districts in

math and English language arts growth, based on a 2017 study by researchers at Stanford's Center for Education Policy Analysis.

East Feliciana Public Schools System, which has a student body that is 60% minority students, was celebrated in 2019 for showing upward momentum in increasing the percentage of students achieving mastery on state assessments.

Madison Parish School District was recognized in 2019 for earning top growth status among African American students, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities.

Responding to the Unique Challenges of 2020-21

The LA BOLD investments and leadership structures have also provided a significant benefit to schools as they navigate school closures and the challenges of virtual learning. Each school continued leadership team meetings and weekly professional learning team meetings online when schools closed last spring due to COVID-19.

Teacher leaders adjusted to provide support for teachers in transitioning their lessons to the virtual environment and continued working together over the summer to plan for assessing and addressing student learning gaps.

School support structures, including teacher leadership roles and established protocols for professional learning teams and leadership teams, enabled partner schools to quickly transition their support for teachers to the virtual environment. NIET and LA BOLD partners have worked to ensure that the most effective practices are continued and strengthened in the 2020-21 school year. By investing in people, and creating structures and systems that support collaborative work and coaching in-person and online, the LA BOLD grant partners are improving teaching and learning and increasing the percentage of high-need students with effective educators.



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