

Investing in Teacher Leadership to Accelerate Learning



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High rates of teacher turnover and persistent student achievement gaps are ongoing challenges for many Indiana schools. State and district leaders have responded with a range of initiatives and policies to strengthen teaching and learning and to increase student access to effective teachers. One of the most promising is the development of teacher career pathways and distributed leadership models focused on strengthening classroom instruction. In 2020, the Indiana Governor’s Next Level Teacher Compensation Commission recommended this approach by encouraging districts to create new opportunities for teachers to increase their compensation through career ladders or pathways that utilize the instructional and leadership capacity of educators to improve teaching and learning.

Three school districts that have made teacher leadership a core strategy for improvement received a federal award to advance this work. Brown County Schools, Goshen Community Schools, and Perry Township Schools partnered with the nonprofit National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) to win a five-year, \$47 million federal grant from the Teacher and School Leader (TSL) Incentive Program. The grant supports the development of teacher and school leader skills and structures for distributed leadership in 32 schools, serving approximately 25,000 students, 1,500 teachers, and 80 school leaders across the three districts.

These districts are located in different parts of the state and serve communities from urban to remote rural locales. What they have in common is the continual need to improve teaching and learning to support diverse and changing populations of students, including refugees, English learners, minority students, special education students, and students receiving free and reduced-price meals. An Institute of Education Sciences study demonstrated that students in high-need schools are the least likely to have access to effective teachers.¹ This finding kicked off a number of initiatives, including one by the state of Indiana ([Excellent Educators for All Initiative](#)), to ensure all students have effective teachers, especially those in the highest-need schools. In line with this goal, and to address students’ diverse needs, the districts are investing in distributed leadership structures and teacher career pathways as evidence-based strategies for improving teaching and learning in measurable and sustainable ways. This strategy is also at the core of their efforts to change school cultures to focus on growth, equity, and inclusion.

Partner Districts

[Brown County School Corporation](#), a small district located about an hour south of Indianapolis, provides access to high-quality education in a rural setting. The district serves 1,713 students across six schools. Brown County has been committed to raising

¹ Max, J., & Glazerman, S. (2014). Do Disadvantaged Students Get Less Effective Teaching? Key Findings from Recent Institute of Education Sciences Studies (Evaluation Brief). In *Mathematica Policy Research Reports* (a7da30900bb047038d31acd568b7e97d; Mathematica Policy Research Reports). Mathematica Policy Research. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/mpr/mprres/a7da30900bb047038d31acd568b7e97d.html>
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED544675.pdf>

student achievement above statewide student averages, but has faced the challenge of recruiting top talent.

Goshen Community Schools is located in Goshen, Indiana—a city about three hours north of Indianapolis where RV manufacturing is a key industry. The district's nine schools serve a majority-minority student population of 6,410, 57% of whom are eligible for free or reduced-priced meals.

Perry Township Schools is an urban school district located in the south Indianapolis area. It is home to 16,835 students across 17 schools. Perry is the second-fastest growing district in Indiana due in large part to an influx of refugees. The percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-priced meals has increased from 61% in 2013-14 to 71% in 2020-21.

GEO Academies Indiana will join the project in the 2021-22 school year, expanding the grant's reach and impact on Indiana's students. GEO's four charter schools, located in Gary and Indianapolis, serve 1,644 students, 80% of whom are eligible for free or reduced-priced meals.

Developing Teacher Leadership Roles to Increase Instructional Quality

One of the most powerful strategies implemented by the districts has been the creation and strengthening of teacher leadership roles in every school. The districts have two teacher leadership roles: the mentor teacher who is partially released from the classroom 3-4 hours each week, and the master teacher who is fully released from the classroom and serves as a full-time instructional coach and facilitator of professional learning. Districts are intentional in selecting and cultivating teachers to be leaders. These roles are filled by highly effective teachers, allowing their expertise to benefit a greater number of students. The master teacher, with support from mentor teachers, is responsible for designing, customizing, and facilitating professional learning for classroom teachers. This structure allows for professional learning to be tailored to individual teacher and student population needs. Teacher leaders join school leaders to form an instructional leadership team, bringing their classroom experience, data analysis skills, and knowledge of students and teachers to discussions about school goals and strategies. The instructional leadership team collaborates to analyze student and teacher data to ensure that professional learning meetings and follow-up support are aligned to individual needs and goals. Teacher leader participation in leadership team meetings creates stronger coaching moments for teachers, but the opportunity to grow into a leadership role also helps retain teachers who are looking to advance along the career path.

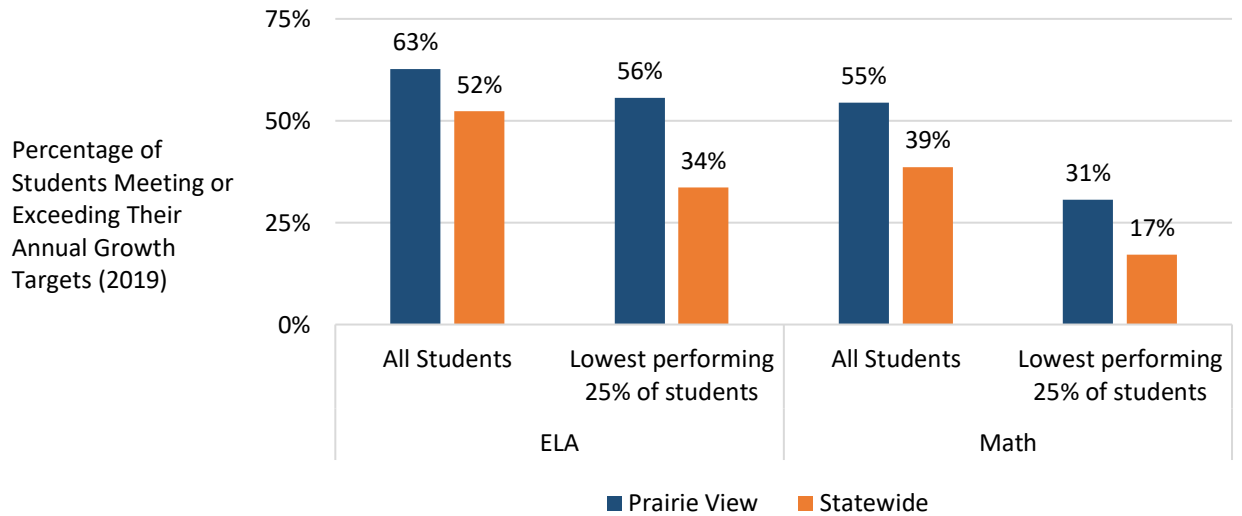
In the 2019-2020 school year, districts selected and trained over 200 teacher leaders. Teacher leaders are selected based on their effectiveness as classroom teachers and their instructional skills and knowledge. NIET worked with the districts to ensure that the teachers selected to

take on leadership roles had track records of success with students, as well as the disposition and skills needed to support adult learners. Once selected, teacher leaders were trained and supported in their new responsibilities, ranging from analyzing student data to field-testing instructional strategies. Master teachers in each building work in partnership with mentors and other master teachers in the district. “We’re seeing our own homegrown teachers blossom into solid master teachers,” said Tracey Noe, district administrator in Goshen. “They are leading professional development that is high-quality and aligned to the needs of classroom teachers and their students. We are seeing teachers improve over the course of the year.” Creating roles for mentor and master teachers creates a career pathway for effective teachers, improving overall instruction in the building and enabling classroom teachers to more effectively support each student.

Spotlight: Prairie View Elementary Is Strengthening Teacher Support to Benefit Students

Prairie View Elementary, located in the heart of Elkhart County, was [recognized as an NIET Founder’s Award Finalist](#) in March 2021. Over half of Prairie View’s 460 students are from economically disadvantaged households, and over a quarter are English learners. Serving all students is at the cornerstone of Prairie View’s work, and is accomplished through a coaching model that builds teachers' skillsets and addresses educational inequities and challenges. Prairie View pairs each teacher with a member of the instructional leadership team.

The district focus in Prairie View is on student ownership of learning. Teachers are more clearly communicating expectations for assignments and providing examples of what excellence looks and sounds like. As a result, students are able to compare their work to exemplars, identify and bridge learning gaps, and move along the continuum to mastery. Based on the most recent state data from the 2018-19 school year, 56% of students in the bottom quartile of performance are on track to achieve proficiency in English language arts, compared to 34% on average statewide, and 31% of these students are on track in math, compared to the statewide average of 17%.



Transitioning to Virtual Learning ... and Back Again

The transition to remote instruction during the pandemic showed how valuable the support of teacher leaders was to classroom teachers. Teacher leaders “went first” and learned best practices and strategies for effective virtual instruction over summer 2020. This allowed them to provide targeted, early support to teachers before school started, as well as over the course of the year, to ensure effective instruction was happening in each classroom, whether virtual, hybrid or in-person. Teacher leaders continued to deliver professional development virtually and modeled impactful remote learning strategies for teachers to experience firsthand.

During a time when there were a lot of unknowns, teacher leaders eased the burden for classroom teachers and enabled them to better support students. Teacher leaders helped them feel more prepared for virtual learning and supported through the transition from one modality to another. “When our school had to shift from in-person back to all virtual learning for a period from November to early January,” said Jody Matthews, principal of Homecroft Elementary in Perry Township, “all teachers were prepared and phenomenal.” The support teachers received during their professional development time and the coaching from their teacher leaders contributed to the success of each school’s shift to virtual. This was reflected in the school’s student attendance rate of 95% during the virtual learning time period at a time when the national average of absent students increased in both virtual and in-person settings.² Teacher leaders have helped their schools maintain strong instruction for students regardless of instructional modality, leading to high student engagement and attendance.

² Lieberman, M. (2020, Oct. 16). 5 Things You Need to Know About Student Absences During COVID-19. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-student-absences-during-covid-19/2020/10>

To further strengthen their pandemic response, districts used the [NIET Virtual Companion Tool](#). This tool and associated training describe how effective instruction translates to remote or hybrid learning environments, providing a clear roadmap for teachers. “Despite the challenges of the COVID pandemic, we have not seen any catastrophic dips in our student data,” said one district administrator “During the pandemic, we have held true to our practices of looking at data and targeting our students who need interventions the most. Our master and mentor teachers have taken the lead on how to analyze that data first and have embedded that data analysis into professional development. This has helped us get the most bang for our buck in terms of continuing to support student achievement.” Teacher leaders’ efforts to create consistent support and coaching for teachers, even as disruptions and school closings occurred over the last year, enabled teachers to keep their focus on students and delivering effective instruction each day.

Supporting Principals to Be Strong Instructional Leaders

A recent synthesis of research from the last two decades confirms that principals can have a significant impact on student learning outcomes, accelerating annual student learning by more than two months.³ However, the combination of the increasing complexity of the principal’s job coupled with a lack of time and support is making the principalship unsustainable for many. In fact, a recent national survey found that 45% of principals report that they are considering leaving the profession.⁴ It has never been more important for districts to support school principals to be strong instructional leaders who prioritize effective teaching. Brown County, Goshen, and Perry Township are prioritizing support for principals to build their skills to coach and support teachers on effective instruction. These districts have increased support for principals first by creating a roadmap and a clear understanding of what is expected of them as instructional leaders.

By creating teacher leader roles and engaging teacher leaders on the leadership team, principals have been able to expand the leadership capacity in schools and provide high-quality support to every teacher. “Some of the most valuable coaching and support I provide to principals is when I support them to grow the capacity of their team. I probably spend 70 or more percent of my time focused on supporting principals and their work, either visiting a classroom, professional learning meetings, or meeting with building principals,” said Bob Bohannon, assistant superintendent for career preparation in Perry Township. “When I’m there I’m an active participant so that I become a new learner as well.” Clear expectations have created consistency across coaching, professional learning, and evaluation – ultimately helping

³ Grissom, J. A., Egalite, A.J. & Lindsay, C.A. (2021). *How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research*. New York: The Wallace Foundation.

⁴ National Association of Secondary School Principals. (2020, Aug. 21). Principals Say Pandemic Conditions Are Accelerating Their Plans to Leave the Principalship. *School of Thought*. <https://www.nassp.org/2020/08/21/principals-say-pandemic-conditions-are-accelerating-their-plans-to-leave-the-principalship/>

get principals and district leaders on the same page with a common vision and a shared language.

By investing the time to create a shared language around strong instructional leadership and what that looks like in various aspects of a principal's practice, the districts are building a culture of reflection and learning. Clear expectations in specific areas of practice now support each principal to reflect on their own practice and what they need to grow. This mirrors the work principals are doing to better support teachers, as described by Brian Knight, principal at Southport High School in Perry Township: "A lot of my focus, and that of my leadership team, is on individuals – making growth plans for each person in order to continue to stretch them and build their capacity. That is what I need as a leader as well." Using principal standards as a tool for growth has helped school leaders identify gaps and areas for improvement as well as specific strengths to build on.

Increasing Equitable Access to Effective Educators

Brown County, Goshen, and Perry Township all serve a high percentage of students from economically disadvantaged households, and have made it a priority to ensure that these students have equitable access to effective educators. They are using the support from the grant to align their systems of evaluation, professional development, support, advancement, and compensation to better ensure all students have access to effective teachers every day.

When hiring new teachers, district and school leaders communicate about the support that all teachers receive, thereby enhancing their recruitment efforts. In addition to performance-based compensation that teachers can earn, teacher leaders provide individualized support and mentorship so that teachers can grow in their profession and eventually have the opportunity to even take on a leadership role themselves. Talented teacher candidates know they will be supported and earn additional compensation, and as a result they are attracted to these high-need districts and supported to remain in their positions long-term. "I recently met with a talented teacher recruit who was deciding between two job offers, one from our district and one from a neighboring, more affluent school district," shared a Brown County district administrator. "Ultimately, this teacher chose to join Brown County because of the added support, compensation, and advancement opportunities that she would receive." In a time of teacher shortages, teachers are choosing to join these districts, drawn by high levels of support and opportunities to advance in their careers.

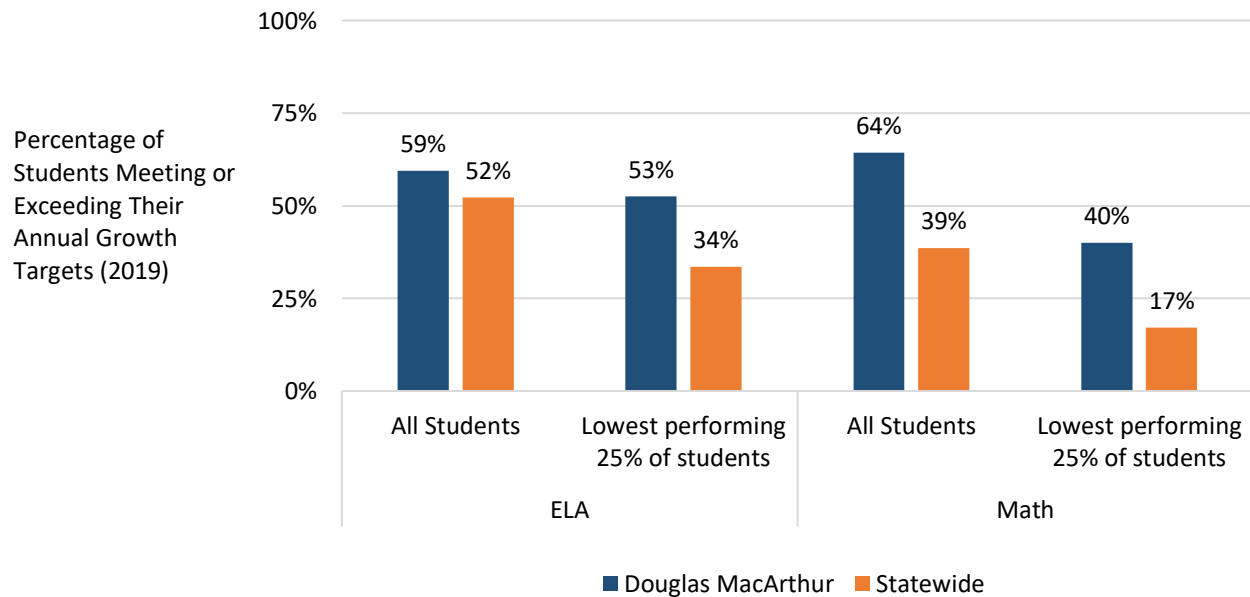
The teacher leadership structure and emphasis on instructional support are not only helping to recruit talent to the districts, but they are also helping to increase the retention of effective teachers. "Once they get here, they really aren't leaving," said Pat Mapes, superintendent in Perry Township. "That's because of all the support they receive. You come here and you're not on an island. There's a master and mentor teacher who can help you." Due in part to these recruitment and retention strategies, Perry Township's annual teacher retention rate has

reached 94%.⁵ Ultimately, these strategies will increase equitable access in the three districts as more students are taught by an effective or highly effective teacher.

Spotlight: Douglas MacArthur Elementary Is Closing Achievement Gaps

Douglas MacArthur Elementary, part of Perry Township Schools, serves 880 students. MacArthur experienced a significant shift in demographics due to an influx of refugees, mostly from Myanmar. In recent years, the school’s English Learner student population has increased from 24% to over 50%, and its eligibility of students for free or reduced-price lunch has jumped from 53% to 73%.

Educators at MacArthur have had success in raising student achievement, particularly for students in the bottom 25% of performance in each grade. The instructional leadership team holds data conferences with these students to establish goals and concrete steps to meet them; serves as mentors; and celebrates their achievements with events throughout the year. Their efforts have paid off, with 53% of those students meeting growth targets in English language arts compared to the state average of 34%, and 40% meeting targets in math compared to the state average of 17%. In March 2021, MacArthur’s success was nationally recognized with [the NIET Founder’s Award](#).



⁵ Indiana Department of Education. (n.d.). Educator Evaluations. Retrieved June 17, 2021, from <https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/evaluations/er-report-2019-2020.xlsx>

Sustaining Progress in the Coming School Year

Professional learning is more relevant, timely, and outcome-oriented in Brown County, Goshen, and Perry Township now that it is facilitated within the school buildings and led by teacher leaders with direct knowledge of teacher and student needs. “It’s not, ‘Let’s go learn something that’s happening somewhere else and try to make that fit for our kids,’” said Gavin Steele, principal of Van Buren Elementary in Brown County. “We have people leading the way, seeing what works with our kids, then bringing it to the professional learning teams and teaching it to the rest of the staff. It happens within our own walls.” This in-house support and coaching for teachers will be an especially important resource in the coming school year as educators address the challenges of academic recovery and acceleration. The participating districts are planning for the 2021-22 school year with the support of [NIET training, tools, and resources](#). Teacher leaders are leading the way, analyzing data, highlighting where individual teachers and students will need the most support, and customizing strategies to address their needs. The structures and strategies put in place with the support of the grant have enabled these districts to create more effective teaching and learning in every classroom while building a culture of growth, equity, and inclusion.

The work of educators in Brown County, Goshen, and Perry Township can be seen in the improvements in teaching and learning as well as in the many ways that they have created more equitable and inclusive environments to better address the needs of diverse student populations.