

Indiana Districts Utilize NIET Structures and Support to Navigate Virtual Schooling in First Two Years of Federal Grant

Research Brief

The Background

In 2019, NIET was awarded a grant through the federal Teacher and School Leader (TSL) Incentive Program to expand and sustain work to support teachers and improve students' academic success in three Indiana school districts. TSL grants support districts' human capital management systems, specifically those that include performance-based compensation as a primary component, like the [TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement](#).

The TAP System launched in 1999 as a comprehensive educator effectiveness model to offer career advancement and leadership opportunities for educators, a fair and transparent evaluation process linked to job-embedded professional development and performance-based compensation, which culminate in improved instructional practices and student achievement.

In spring 2020, as schools faced the dilemma of moving wholly or partially to an online teaching and learning environment, the TAP System provided a consistent structure to rely on for many NIET partners, including Indiana TSL partners.

In late fall 2020, NIET conducted seven focus groups with principals and district administrators from the Indiana TSL grant partners about their experiences with the TAP System and NIET's support as they transitioned among various modes of instruction. Focus groups were coded for common themes and topically organized. The four most frequently occurring themes are presented below.

NIET Structures and Support Across Multiple Modalities of Teaching and Learning

As NIET partners moved from the traditional face-to-face modes of instruction to virtual or hybrid modes, NIET and the TAP System kept the focus on instruction through established structures.

1. Creating Virtual Professional Learning Communities. One element of the TAP System that provides structure is the weekly professional learning community "cluster" meetings. Led by mentor and master teachers, cluster meetings are built into teachers' weekly schedules. During cluster meetings, teachers examine student data, engage in collaborative planning, and learn instructional strategies that have been field-tested in their respective schools. This locally centered and delivered training is a benefit of the TAP System greatly appreciated by the school leaders:

"We've sent teachers out to professional development before...And then what happens over time is that they may or may not come

Indiana TSL Incentive Program

At-a-glance

The TSL districts use the TAP System to improve their human capital management systems, increase equitable access to effective educators, and improve retention of a diverse workforce for the benefit of high-need students.

Start: 2019-20 school year

Districts: 3

Schools: 32

Educators: 1,815

Students: 25,418

Brown County Schools

Brown County Schools used 2019-20 as a planning year and began full implementation of the TAP System in 2020-21.

Schools: 6

Educators: 139

Students: 1,858

Goshen Community Schools

Goshen Community Schools has implemented the TAP System in all schools since 2012.

Schools: 9

Educators: 562

Students: 6,622

Perry Township Schools

Perry Township Schools has been an NIET partner since 2012. The TSL grant allows Perry to expand the TAP System to all district schools.

Schools: 17

Educators: 1,114

Students: 16,938

back with something decent. And when they don't, it's frustrating that you spent those dollars and sent a teacher away from the kids. In this case, that's not happening. We're able to use our own people to train from within. And it creates a team atmosphere. ... We're getting quality training, not only for one or two or three...Everybody's in this together and going through the same training and that's what's been so awesome about this." – Brown County Principal

Professional development continues into each classroom as master teachers model lessons, observe classroom instruction, and support career teachers in the improvement of their teaching methods. When instruction went virtual in spring 2020, school leadership teams adjusted and utilized weekly cluster meetings to prepare teachers to teach in the virtual environment.

"I can't imagine doing what we're doing now with going to virtual without having an hour a week of PD [professional development] time built in... The shared leadership is so crucial to the functioning of the school." – Goshen Community Principal

These clusters became the mechanism for translating effective instructional strategies into the virtual environment as well as keeping lines of communication open.

"Our virtual clusters have been absolutely brilliant. We're talking about virtual instruction and we're teaching about virtual instruction. We're giving so many tools for the teachers to take back into use. Our transition to virtual has been so smooth because of our master teachers, their use of virtual clusters, and using the tools that were going to be needed." -- Perry Township Principal

Spotlight on Brown County Schools

During the 2019-20 school year as part of the Indiana TSL grant, Brown County Schools began a planning year in preparation to implement NIET's TAP System. In a survey of educators' perceptions of current practices that year, Brown County teachers expressed a desire for **higher quality professional development** as well as more structured time to **collaborate**. The TAP System excels in these areas.

Before joining the TSL grant, Brown County's teacher evaluation did not systematically inform their professional development efforts. In the fall 2020 focus groups, Brown County district and school leaders discussed their planning year and the effects they were already beginning to see from implementing the TAP System during the 2020-21 school year. Leaders expressed enthusiasm for the changes the TAP System has brought: they are now intentionally growing their teachers through collaboration and a schoolwide vision. This was one principal's response:

"We have one new staff member this year. The support that he's been able to get from the team that I can't necessarily give him has been amazing. I've seen him grow as a teacher and feel supported and that's just a huge difference. You get a young person and he's not floundering; he might be potentially if we didn't have this group of people [mentor and master teachers] who were there to help support him... ..But I do know that he's really successful right now. I think a big part of that is the support system with people there to help him through the struggles of [being] a new teacher."

The TSL grant is helping Brown County as well as two (soon-to-be three) other school districts in Indiana to fill a need for high-quality, embedded professional development and time for teachers to collaborate. This opportunity supports teachers, boosts teacher retention, and provides more equitable access to effective instruction.

2. Leveraging Teacher Leaders. As part of the TSL grant, skilled teachers have the opportunity to serve as master and mentor teachers, which allows them to receive additional compensation for providing high levels of support to career teachers. Along with administrators, master and mentor teachers form a leadership team to deliver school-based professional support and appraise teachers' growth and performance. As one principal stated, teacher leaders are a sounding board for ideas:

"I know that when I run something by them [master teachers], they're a group that provides me immediate feedback with ideas. So, in terms of my own leadership, that's a great sounding board for me. I know that if I'm rolling something out and they're poking holes in it or asking me questions, that helps me then formulate better ideas for the school as a whole." – Goshen Community Principal

This grant component leverages the contributions of highly skilled teachers who want to advance their careers and earning potential without having to leave the classroom to become administrators. As the Perry Township principal stated about the virtual clusters, teacher leaders (master and mentor teachers) took on the responsibility to transform effective instruction from face-to-face to virtual. Teacher leaders play a key role in the effective implementation of the TAP System as a link between school administration and classroom learning. This role intensified in the TSL districts when COVID-19 hit and they had to work with their teams to ensure effective instructional practices continued.

"Our master teachers have been really key at modeling ways in cluster of how to present content. So, the teachers get to experience it from the student level first, and then they can go and mimic the strategies that our masters are using for remote teaching in their own classrooms. And so, they can see how the students experience learning the content versus being the teacher presenting the content." – Perry Township Assistant Principal



Further, a report issued in 2020 by the Indiana governor’s Next Level Teacher Compensation Commission recommends improving teacher retention by improving “flexibility for teachers to control their individual compensation through career ladder systems: Implement local teacher career ladder systems as a mechanism for schools to highlight and utilize the instructional and leadership capacity of current school corporation educators to improve teaching and student learning” (p. 10). As the TSL districts and schools have implemented a career ladder system, their experiences lend support to this “leadership capacity”:

“When you talk about recruiting leadership, I love this platform [TAP System]. I love the career ladder. I love that we can take highly effective teachers and groom them into leadership. We’ve been really lucky that we have had some really strong instructors that have a passion for leadership. The pathway allows us to bring these strong instructors up, put them into positions of leadership. The structures of cluster and ILT allow us to grow them as leaders.” – Perry Township District Administrator

The capacity for teacher leaders, through individualized support, to influence teacher retention is evident in the account of one principal:

“We have a teacher we put into kindergarten at the last minute. She’s struggling, but we have supports and she’s come so far. ... We had an honest talk. I said, ‘Stick it out until fall break.’ This was already the middle of September. The master teacher went into the classroom full time for a week, just coaching, and then transitioned her back. It made a huge difference. At fall break, she said, ‘I want to stay’, and we’re glad she’s staying: a big improvement. We’d have lost her had there not been the master teacher.” – Goshen Community Principal



3. Aligning Practice to the NIET Teaching and Learning Standards Rubric. At the foundation of the TAP System is the NIET Teaching and Learning Standards Rubric that, as TSL school and district leaders say, is the common denominator for providing effective instruction regardless of the mode of delivery. Based on nationally normed, research-based standards, NIET's rubric defines effective teaching and fosters collaboration around a common language that correlates with student achievement. The [NIET Rubric Companion for Virtual Instruction](#) also helps educators deepen their understanding of high-quality virtual learning. The companion describes what key instructional indicators should look and sound like when planning and delivering virtual learning.

"I think the rubric is just that consistent player. It's the player that's always there and it doesn't matter where you're teaching or what you're teaching but it's instructional strategies you're using. I don't know that that piece has really been impacted because of COVID. The structures are there; we just continue to use them." – Goshen Community District Administrator

To improve the quality of classroom instruction, an assessment of the instruction is vital. Such assessment is also essential if teachers are to be held accountable for their work and professional improvement. Together, the rubric and companion tool form the basis for an observation system for improving the quality of instruction in any learning environment. Importantly, observation results guide both formative feedback for one-on-one mentoring sessions and plans for cluster group meetings, which ensure relevant professional development for teachers and a consistent vision for instruction.

"What's really rewarding is when you go into [a classroom] observation and you see that the things that you've been working on are implemented in the classroom. The reflection then that you get to have with teachers afterwards can be a real positive experience." – Brown County Principal

4. Coaching and Support. As part of the TSL grant, the schools and districts are supported by a team of NIET coaches and support staff and have access to a number of materials and resources. These include the NIET Rubric Companion for Virtual Instruction and accompanying handbook, "deep dives" into transforming lessons from in-person to virtual, webinars on observation and evaluation in a virtual environment, and the NIET National Summer Institute, which was held virtually for partner institutions in 2020.

"The [NIET] National Summer Institute was able to pivot quickly and deliver some great, high-quality professional development to our leadership teams. ...[It] laid the groundwork for thinking about what this format [virtual instruction] might look like and how teacher leaders might be responsive and support teachers as they shift from traditional to more of a remote setting." – Brown County District Administrator

Many of the TSL grant activities that have helped partnering schools transition to virtual learning align with the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) recommendations for school leaders, featuring NIET's Planning Considerations Guide, as well as a recommendation from the U.S. Office of Educational Technology that schools form a leadership team dedicated to digital learning. The NIET Rubric Companion for Virtual Instruction is also featured in IDOE's Evaluation Toolkit for Remote Learning. The NIET support team for the Indiana TSL grant helped partners utilize resources and put learning into practice.

"We operated under the assumption that at some point we would be virtual. So, this summer we did some work with the companion rubric [NIET Rubric Companion for Virtual Instruction]. We also got teacher feedback and student feedback about what the spring was like. We created a cycle one [training] that supported what is good virtual instruction. That was with NIET support and it helped us set our teachers up for success. My assistant principal and I were able to attend the virtual observation training that was offered through NIET, which was also beneficial. If we have to evaluate in that format, we feel comfortable with that." – Perry Township Principal

NIET support is provided within the context of each individual school. Support is specific to the needs and vision of the school as mentioned by a number of principals and encapsulated by the following statement:

"What I appreciate that we've received this year is that I feel the support is tailored to us... specific to our needs, our building. What I appreciate is it's not a meeting that every principal and assistant principal in the township is going to, and what we're learning might be applied to us, or it might not be applied to us. The support is specific to where we're at and what we need and where we're looking to go and what our vision is." – Perry Township Principal

Effective Instruction Regardless of the Modality

School and district leaders across all three districts agree that having professional learning communities, teacher leaders, the NIET Teaching and Learning Standards Rubric, and NIET support have all helped make pandemic-related transitions smoother. Though these structures have a record of success behind them, they would have little impact on teaching and learning without the dedication and hard work of the district and school personnel to put student learning first no matter the circumstances. The TAP System is a collaborative effort involving everyone from the district superintendent to the first-year classroom teacher. The TAP System is designed to coordinate the people and its various elements (the Rubric, teacher leaders, observation, professional growth and performance pay) into a cohesive unit to deliver effective instruction and learning schoolwide and districtwide.

Goshen Community Schools and Perry Township Schools, both longtime NIET partners before the grant began, utilized their TAP System structures to smoothly transition their instructional programs into virtual and hybrid modes, with the added benefit of an additional master teacher at each school supported through the grant. Brown County Schools, which started fully implementing the TAP System in 2020-21, benefited from integrating the TAP System structures during the summer months and early autumn, and, despite less experience with the TAP System, is enthusiastic about early successes from their implementation efforts. While it's too early to determine the impact on student performance, district and school leaders report the effectiveness of instruction remained at a high level through the efforts of their personnel and the TAP System.

The Indiana TSL grant may extend to five years. This brief examined school and district leaders' perceptions of the first year and a half of the grant period. Leaders look at the work ahead with resounding pride and confidence of their partnership with NIET and the progress they have achieved.



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