TAP IN FOCUS

TAP Makes Giant Leap with More than $300 Million in Teacher Incentive Funds

What Makes a Successful TAP School?

Getting Teacher Evaluation Right

TAP Training Goes Virtual
When I introduced TAP in 1999, we were on the cutting edge of how teachers were being trained, supported, evaluated and rewarded. Since then, TAP’s proven opportunities for professional growth, career advancement, performance-based compensation and rigorous evaluation have made a significant impact on teacher effectiveness and student achievement growth in schools across the country—of which many are among America’s highest-need communities. The new and increased funding through the Teacher Incentive Fund will provide far more young people with the talented teachers they need to grow and compete successfully in a global economy.”
The latest announcement of federal Teacher Incentive Funds proved to be a significant milestone for the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET)’s signature initiative, TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement. The U.S. Department of Education awarded NIET and numerous states and districts more than $300 million in grants to implement the TAP system over the next five years. These grants will help double TAP’s reach to 20,000 teachers and 200,000 students in the 2011-12 school year. What’s more, Indiana will become TAP’s fourth statewide program, and Arizona State University will launch TAP into a higher education partnership for teacher preparation.

With the enactment of the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) in 2006, the federal government initiated support for innovative approaches that compensate teachers and principals based on effectiveness. Thirty-three TIF grantees across the nation are already implementing performance-based compensation systems. The latest allotment of funds adds 62 new TIF grantees in 27 states, 14 of which are TAP projects.

An increasing number of states and districts have chosen to implement TAP with the federal funds based on TAP’s reputation as the nation’s leading education reform system combining career advancement; ongoing professional development; rigorous evaluation and accountability; and performance-based compensation.

“We are excited about NIET’s dramatic growth and look forward to working with all of the TAP partners to create cultures of excellence for teachers and students,” said NIET President and CEO Dr. Gary Stark.

Three of the TIF grants were awarded directly to NIET, in partnership with Knox County Schools in Tennessee; Cross County and Lincoln Consolidated School Districts in Arkansas; and the Advance Baton Rouge Charter School Association in Louisiana.
Knox County Schools’ Core Vision

In Knox County Schools (KCS) in Knoxville, Tennessee, $26.4 million is going towards expanding TAP from four to 13 of its highest-need schools. The TAP system has become central to KCS Superintendent Jim McIntyre’s vision for increasing teacher and principal excellence in the district. In July 2009, he developed a five-year strategic plan called Building on Strength: Excellence for All Children. Written with the collaboration of key stakeholders, including the teachers’ union, administrators, school board members and community members, the plan outlines the following goals: 1) establish a culture of collaboration and leadership; 2) provide quality instruction that focuses on student learning; 3) maintain high student expectations, high standards and accountability; and 4) deliberately develop effective principals. TAP is the vehicle to accomplish all four goals, supporting schools to align performance-based compensation to professional development, evaluation and career advancement, to help all educators improve.

Kathleen Karnes, a TAP teacher at Holston Middle School—one of KCS’s existing TAP schools—speaks to the impact TAP has already made on her individual teaching practices and the school’s achievement as a whole. “Receiving useful evaluations from the master teachers allows me to concentrate on my strengths and to work on my weaknesses, which benefits me and my students,” she said. “With TAP, there is support, knowledge and recognition of achievement for teaching that every teacher needs.”

Transforming Schools in a Charter Consortium: Baton Rouge, Louisiana

NIET has strong experience helping charter consortiums build a culture of excellence through TAP. When the Algiers Charter Schools Association (ACSA) opened some of New Orleans’ first schools post-Katrina in August 2005, its leaders adopted TAP as its education strategy from the start. The leaders of the Advance Baton Rouge Charter School Association—some of whom have experienced ACSA’s success firsthand—seek to replicate the results in this new consortium serving some of the highest-need charter schools in the state. In fact, 94 percent of the student body qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch, compared to the state average of 66 percent.

“This grant will support our schools in significantly increasing the effectiveness of teachers and principals,” said Hank Shepard, CEO of Advance Baton Rouge. “We anticipate that this will help us accelerate student learning growth as a result.”

Improving Arkansas’ Highest-Need Schools in Lincoln and Cross County

The Lincoln Consolidated and Cross County School Districts, located in rural northwest and northeast Arkansas, are partnering with NIET in an $8.9-million grant to advance ongoing efforts that improve teacher effectiveness and provide a long-term, comprehensive support structure to attract and retain teachers. Participating schools serve some of the state’s highest-need students. Through TAP, the districts work to ensure that these students are taught by effective teachers who have the skills to increase student academic growth and close achievement gaps.

TAP’s rigorous evaluation system helps to identify and reward effective teachers using student achievement data and observation of classroom practice and to provide teachers with feedback and support from these evaluations to improve their instructional practice. In addition, TAP’s performance-based compensation makes salaries for effective teachers more competitive, helping to combat a significant salary disadvantage these districts face compared to their neighbors.
Increasing State-Level Partnerships

The Indiana and Arizona projects were among 11 TIF grants awarded directly to states, districts and schools for the implementation of TAP, including the Texas Education Agency, Louisiana Department of Education, South Carolina Department of Education; and Colorado Springs District 11, CO; Lucia Mar Unified School District, CA; Milwaukee Public Schools, WI; Wake County Public School System, NC; Iberville Parish School District, LA; and Augusta School District, AR.

In creating the fourth statewide TAP program, the Indiana Department of Education is following the lead of Texas, Louisiana and South Carolina, whose education departments all received TIF grants to sustain and expand TAP. State TAP teams have driven much of TAP’s expansion in the last several years, serving as incubators for new developments and improvements in TAP implementation and producing strong student achievement gains. In Indiana, 44 schools in 11 school corporations are currently slated to participate in the TIF program. According to the Indiana Department of Education, many of these schools “have teacher shortages in one or more subjects, high educator turnover and high numbers of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch.”

“The TAP system has demonstrated its value in schools across the country, and its founding principles mirror our own goals for identifying, supporting, recognizing and keeping our best educators,” said Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Tony Bennett. “I’m excited for our partnering schools and eager to see the results this program will have for their students.”

TAPping into Teacher Preparation: The Arizona Ready-for-Rigor Project

NIET’s partnership with Arizona State University (ASU) marks TAP’s entrée into the field of higher-education-level teacher preparation. ASU’s Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College received a $43.4-million five-year grant to support its effort, in partnership with the state education department, to simultaneously reform schools in high-need communities and ASU’s teacher preparation programs. The TIF grant effort, called the Arizona Ready-for-Rigor Project, will work with a network of 71 schools that recruit much of their faculty from ASU’s teacher preparation program.

“ASU, in partnership with high-need communities and school districts, plans to improve teacher education programs in these communities by creating schools which provide these future teachers with strong mentors, and show them how to use data to foster students’ academic achievement,” said Mari Koerner, dean of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. “We believe that using good classroom teaching models and data-driven student achievement results, this statewide initiative will simultaneously transform partner schools and improve ASU’s previous teacher preparation programs.”

TIF grants are annually appropriated.
Strong Leadership and an Infrastructure of Support

Strong leadership and infrastructure typically consist of a capable TAP Leadership Team (TLT) at the school level, coordinators at the district level and/or directors and their staff at the state level.

Case in point: Texas TAP is housed at a Regional Education Service Center of the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and led by Texas TAP Executive Director Dr. Tammy Kreuz. The Texas TAP team provides ongoing, high-quality training and technical assistance to TAP schools through a staff of executive master teachers and regional coordinators. The state staff takes the lead in identifying and preparing new schools to enter TAP, ensuring fidelity to the key elements of the reform, and constantly evaluating ways to further strengthen implementation. Texas TAP has also established strong partnerships among the TEA, NIET, and TAP districts and schools. “These partnerships,” says Kreuz, “provide a network of support, enabling research, policy and practice to work together to maximize teacher quality and improve student achievement.” As a result, Texas TAP schools have demonstrated strong student learning gains, with 100 percent having achieved at least one solid year of value-added growth in 2009-10 and 68 percent far exceeding one year of growth.

WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL TAP SCHOOL?

Many TAP practitioners observe that TAP is the way they drive teacher effectiveness and student achievement. How do the most successful TAP schools achieve consistently above average results? National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) research finds that, regardless of their district or state, high-performing TAP schools share five key characteristics.
Making TAP the Strategy for School Improvement

Because it aligns key systems—including professional development, teacher evaluation, career opportunity and performance-based compensation—with school improvement goals, TAP becomes the driver of school improvement.

Case in point: The DeSoto Parish School System, located in northern rural Louisiana, has distinguished itself as a leader in the Louisiana TAP effort through its consistent and strategic growth in the number of TAP schools and quality of implementation. TAP has grown from two schools in the 2008-09 school year to 10 schools in 2010-11, and with all 11 district schools by 2011-12, DeSoto will be the first in Louisiana to reach districtwide TAP implementation. TAP’s abilities to foster teacher collaboration, promote leadership and build human capacity at the school level are keys to DeSoto’s commitment to TAP. North DeSoto Middle School was named a 2010 TAP School of Promise for increasing its School Performance Score from 97 before TAP to 106 in 2009-10 after TAP implementation, and earning a schoolwide value-added score of “5”—indicating “far above average” results compared to similar schools in the state. Also in 2010, DeSoto Parish was placed in the state’s “Top Ten List” for the largest district growth points and for the most schools meeting their growth targets.

Capable TAP Mentor and Master Teachers

TAP principals work in partnership with master and mentor teachers who, along with the principal, form the TAP Leadership Team. The team’s ability and dedication is key to providing a powerful vision for instructional excellence and for working with the faculty to make that vision a reality.

Case in point: Established in 2005 in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Algiers Charter Schools Association (ACSA) in New Orleans, Louisiana, selected TAP at the outset as its vehicle to strengthen professional support and development. The leadership team structure of master and mentor teachers, in working with principals, has helped to create a process of constant collaboration and teamwork with a laser-like focus on instruction and student achievement. As a result, the schools have experienced consistently-above-average student academic learning gains for three consecutive years. For the 2009-10 year, seven of the nine schools with value-added data achieved a “5,” the highest score possible, signifying “far above average” student achievement growth compared to their peers across the state. One school earned a “4,” signifying “above average” results, and one school received a “3,” signifying a solid year’s growth.

Full and Consistent Implementation of TAP Elements

The commitment and capability of TAP principals are crucial elements in a school’s efforts to hire capable TAP Leadership Team members, create meaningful “cluster group” meetings, implement the TAP evaluation process and set up the performance-based compensation system.

Case in point: Principal Mike Savage’s leadership in rigorously implementing TAP at Audelia Creek Elementary School in the Richardson Independent School District, Texas, earned the school the prestigious TAP Founder’s Award in 2010. Before TAP, Audelia Creek was barely clinging to an “academically acceptable” state rating, largely due to a poor teacher retention rate of 33 percent. “TAP’s embedded staff development, rubric for evaluation, as well as multiple career paths, student and teacher growth and economic incentives, have made a clear difference in my school’s success,” said Savage. “In TAP, you are always striving to get better and help teachers and students achieve.” Since starting TAP in the 2005-06 school year, Audelia Creek has received the highest value-added score of “5” every year. The school’s state ratings have reflected this achievement: two years of TAP showed a jump to “recognized” status from “academically acceptable,” and in the 2008-09 year, Audelia Creek received the highest state rating of “exemplary.” The school maintained its “exemplary” rating for the 2009-10 year.

Communicating TAP’s Impact and Demonstrating Full Support for TAP to Teachers, Parents and the Community at Large

Communicating about TAP and the school improvements it produces is essential to long-term success. Leaders in successful TAP schools keep teachers fully informed and involved in the effort, and they reach out beyond their campuses to educate the community about TAP’s impact.

Case in point: In South Carolina, West Hartsville Elementary School has been a model TAP site under the inspired leadership of Principal Dr. Kay Howell and the entire West Hartsville faculty. In the face of deep state and district budget cuts, Howell has been a vocal advocate, along with veteran master teacher Shannon Fraser, for TAP’s potential to transform the education status quo. With its rigorous implementation of TAP and consistent student achievement growth, West Hartsville opens its doors to policymakers at the district, state and federal levels. The school is also a learning lab for practitioners, with a stream of visits from other TAP teachers and principals as well as other educators interested in investigating the use of TAP for their schools.
Revamping teacher evaluation has become a prime national focus in the effort to improve teacher effectiveness. This has partly stemmed from a flurry of reports exposing deep flaws in the ways many teachers are currently supported and evaluated.

One of the most well-known of these reports is *The Widget Effect* by The New Teacher Project, which found that despite an acknowledgement of ineffective teaching within the districts studied, more than 90 percent of teachers were given the highest evaluation rating. Equally troubling is that nearly three quarters of those teachers received no specific feedback about how to improve.

In the push to reverse this trend, the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) has been a leading resource for states and districts in redesigning their approaches to teacher support and evaluation.


“There are good reasons for policymakers and educators to pay close attention to lessons learned from TAP,” said Dr. Gary Stark, president and CEO of NIET. “It is our goal to provide key design and implementation recommendations that can support states and districts in this work.”

“TAP is the longest-sustained and most successful effort to radically transform teacher evaluation using multiple measures, including student achievement gains, in America today,” added Kristan Van Hook, NIET’s senior vice president of public policy and development. “What’s more, TAP’s teacher evaluation system has been tried and tested with thousands of teachers in real school settings over a significant period of time.”
President Obama and Education Secretary Duncan have emphasized that these reforms must be done with teachers and not to teachers. In TAP, we have found that the system must have two goals: to measure performance and to support improvement. These goals represent two distinct levers for change; one is to produce sound data on teacher effectiveness for performance decisions, and the other is to provide individualized and intensive support to teachers to improve their instruction. Increases in teacher effectiveness then derive not only from attracting and retaining talented teachers, but also from growing the talent of every teacher every year. To dramatically improve teacher effectiveness, we couldn’t leave either source of improvement on the table.

Written by NIET researchers Glenn Daley and Lydia Kim, A Teacher Evaluation System That Works validates the strength of TAP’s evaluation system and demonstrates that a well-designed, integrated system such as TAP “can be objective, rigorous, differentiated, multidimensional, linked to student learning and supportive of teacher improvement.”

A practitioner’s point of view is brought to bear on More than Measurement: The TAP System’s Lessons Learned for Designing Better Teacher Evaluation Systems. Compiled by education writer and researcher Craig Jerald, in collaboration with Kristan Van Hook of NIET and TAP practitioners, More than Measurement distills the key elements of TAP’s teacher evaluation into a roadmap for states and districts in designing comprehensive systems. The guidance covers a range of essentials, from identifying goals and developing instructional rubrics to ensuring consistency among raters and facilitating meaningful conversations about teacher practice and areas of improvement.

“While there are many ways to design and implement better approaches to teacher evaluation, there are also many ways to get it wrong,” said Jerald. “With new national momentum and resources behind redesigning the ways teachers are evaluated and supported, it is more important than ever to prevent past mistakes that have resulted in systems that do not accurately measure performance or provide feedback for improvement.”

“As a principal, I see how valuable it is to be able to accurately measure teacher effectiveness,” said Hills. “But I could never handle all those evaluations myself. Having master and mentor teachers work with me to conduct evaluations and take the lead in providing support for teachers to improve has enabled us to make significant improvements in student achievement.”

“Being observed by multiple evaluators and receiving ongoing support help teachers become more comfortable with the process,” said Collins. “Teachers are well-prepared for their observations and they highly value the professional support we provide. Their support really increases when they see their students’ achievement grow.”

A milestone in support to TAP schools, NIET launched the online TAP System Training Portal to connect TAP teachers and principals to the organization’s wealth of training resources. The portal provides real-time access to every aspect of TAP training, from evaluation tools and professional development strategies to professionally filmed videos of exemplary classroom lessons. Perhaps most important, for the first time TAP career (or classroom) teachers have direct access to these powerful resources.

A key benefit of the portal is its ability to break down and illustrate essential components of TAP. The TAP Video Library boasts more than 100 hours of filmed lessons and other footage teachers can use to help understand—and replicate—what makes an effective lesson under the TAP Instructional Rubric. Particularly useful for mentor and master teachers is footage on effectively conducting cluster group and leadership team meetings, as well as footage of pre- and post-conferences on teacher observations.

Teachers also have instant access to the TAP Strategies Database—containing a growing number of proven strategies from TAP teachers across the country. And for those who prefer going paperless, many TAP documents, from the TAP Implementation Manual and TAP Evaluation and Compensation (TEC) Guide to the TAP Leadership Handbook, are only a click away.

“‘To accommodate the demand and increase of TAP schools across the country, I wanted to use the power of our TAP content and training and create a real-time destination of support accessible to the TAP community,’ said Dr. Gary Stark, NIET president and CEO. ‘We look forward to making the portal as dynamic and relevant as possible for all levels of learners.’”

“The portal is a wonderful tool to support the activities with our school services effort,” said Jason Culbertson, NIET’s senior vice president of school services. “It also supplements the training TAP leaders and teachers receive at the National TAP Conference, TAP Summer Institutes and other trainings throughout the year.”

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