Laurens Educators Achieving Results to Net Success (LEARNS)

Teacher and School Leader Incentive Program Grant Application

Table of Contents

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic left its' harmful marks on students across the nation, leading to learning lags and projected financial losses. Although the impacts vary widely between and within states, on average, student achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) decreased by eight points in eighth grade math and three points in eighth grade reading between 2019 and 2022 (Fahle et al., 2023). In South Carolina, students in grades 3-8 lost about four months in math learning and about one month in reading learning between 2019 and 2022 (Education Recovery Scorecard, 2022). Additionally, it is estimated that a student in South Carolina will lose on average $9,406 in lifetime earnings due to the pandemic (DeFeo, 2023). One way to resolve the learning loss is to get experienced and qualified teachers in front of the students who have lost the most—students in schools with high proportions of ethnic/racial minority and low-income students (Fahle et al., 2023). Unfortunately, the least experienced and qualified teachers tend to teach in the most challenging schools (Clotfelter et al., 2007), where students have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

Laurens County School District 55, a Local Education Agency (LEA) in rural South Carolina, is seeking a Teacher and School Leader Incentive Program grant to develop and implement a new human capital management system (HCMS), inclusive of a performance-based compensation system and career advancement opportunities (Absolute Priority 1). Laurens Educators Achieving Results to Net Success (LEARNS) will reach 428 teachers, 22 school leaders, and 5,180 students across the LEA's nine high-need schools (Absolute Priority 2).

Laurens County School District 55 will partner with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET), a national nonprofit, to implement the TAP System as the base to align five HCMS strategies: 1) strengthen the implementation of fair evaluations for educators that are

2

coupled with specific and actionable feedback; 2) create formal opportunities for teacher career advancement; 3) provide job-embedded, teacher-led professional learning opportunities; 4) develop a system of performance-based compensation for teachers and school leaders; and 5) expand the district's vision for improvement and alignment of the HCMS. These structures will enable LEARNS to attain project objectives to 1) increase the effectiveness of teachers, 2) increase the effectiveness of school leaders, and 3) improve student achievement.

LEARNS complements Laurens County School District 55's ongoing work aimed at building school leaders' instructional leadership skills and capacity to integrate sustainable character education. By providing additional resources, LEARNS will support making classroom teaching the driving focus of the district's effort to create schools where equity, diversity, and inclusion are embedded in the school culture (Competitive Preference Priority 1; Competitive Preference Priority 2).

A. Need for Project

(i) *Identifying and addressing gaps/weaknesses in services, infrastructure, or opportunities*

Laurens County School District 55 Overview. Laurens County School District 55 is committed to providing quality education and preparing students for success in college, careers, and life. The district's leadership, including the superintendent and school board, work collaboratively with educators, staff, parents, and the community to ensure the delivery of high-quality education. They focus on establishing strong partnerships, fostering parent engagement, and promoting a culture of continuous improvement.

Laurens County School District 55 acknowledges the distinctive challenges posed by its rural environment, low-income environment. The district serves a racially and ethnically diverse student population. A significant portion of the students, approximately 77%, are in poverty, as

3

classified by the South Carolina Department of Education (Table 1).

Table 1. Laurens School District 55 – District Overview

# Schools	# of Students	% in Poverty	% English Learners	% Black	% Hispanic	% White
9	5,180	77%	11%	28%	16%	52%

Research consistently emphasizes the significant impact of teachers and school leaders on student achievement (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Lee & Mamerow, 2019). However, Laurens County School District's high educator turnover depletes resources and hampers the establishment of a high-performing, stable educator workforce. As a rural district that serves historically underserved student populations, Laurens County School District struggles to attract and retain effective teachers and school leaders, a challenge commonly encountered by schools with high poverty rates nationwide (Gracía & Weiss, 2019), while also facing disparities in the racial composition of students and the teaching force. Specifically, data from the South Carolina Department of Education (2023) shows that in Laurens County School District 55,

- The percentage of teachers teaching out-of-field in 2021-22 was 8.9, which is 6.5 percentage points higher than the state percentage (2.4%).

- The percentage of inexperienced teachers was 23.3 in 2021-22, which is 4.3 percentage points higher than the state (19%).

- The one-year teacher retention in 2022 was 81.5%, six percentage points lower than the state retention (87.1%).

- The average salary for a teacher was $769 less than teachers statewide in 2021-22.

- In 2022, there were 48% non-White students, yet only 21% of teachers were non-White.

- All nine schools meet the TSL high-need criteria (Table 2; Appendix E).

4

Table 2. Laurens County School District 55 – School Overview

Campus Name	% Poverty	# Students	# Teachers	# School Leaders
Laurens District 55 High	71%	450	33	2
Laurens Middle	79%	415	36	2
Ford Elementary	90%	749	62	3
E B Morse Elementary	85%	645	49	3
Laurens Elementary	73%	1432	120	5
Sanders Middle	85%	500	40	2
Waterloo Elementary	87%	400	32	2
Gray Court-Owing Elementary/Middle School	79%	320	31	2
Hickory Tavern Elementary/Middle School	70%	269	25	1

Through its various schools and programs, Laurens County School District 55 aims to meet the diverse needs of its student population. The district is committed to raising student academic achievement and closing achievement gaps, ensuring that all students have access to an equitable and excellent education. However, the COVID-19 pandemic had a noticeable impact on student achievement. Comparing the academic years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022, there was an improvement in student performance in English Language Arts, math, and science on state assessments. However, the percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations on these tests remains lower than pre-pandemic levels (specifically, the 2018-2019 academic year; Figure 1).

Figure 1. Laurens County School District 55 Academic Performance, 2018-19, 2020-21, and 2021-22

Figure 1 shows a bar chart titled "Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding Expectations on SCReady" for ELA, Math, and Science with the following values:

ELA: 2018-19 = 32%, 2020-21 = 24%, 2021-22 = 30%
Math: 2018-19 = 29%, 2020-21 = 18%, 2021-22 = 22%
Science: 2018-19 = 39%, 2020-21 = 23%, 2021-22 = 31%
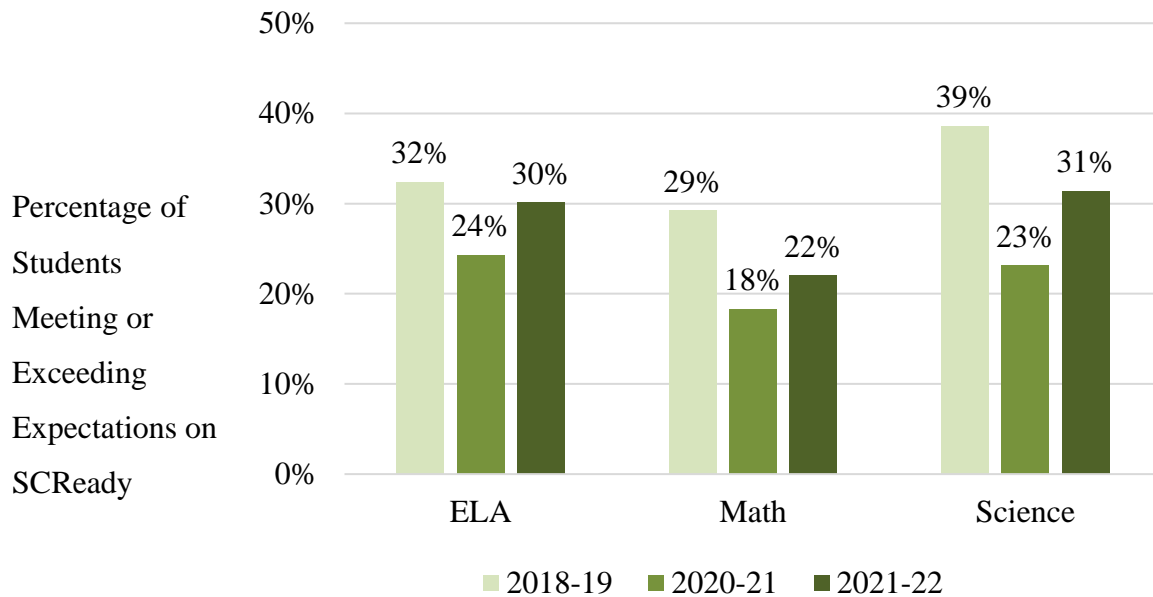
Not only has student performance not fully recovered from the effects of the pandemic, but it also continues to lag behind the state average. Despite some improvements in student achievement from 2020-2021 to 2021-2022, the overall performance of students in the district remains below that of the state as a whole (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Laurens County School District 55 Performance Relative to the State, 2021-22

Figure 2 shows a bar chart titled "Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding Expectations on SCReady" comparing Laurens 55 and Statewide for ELA, Math, and Science:

ELA: Laurens 55 = 30%, Statewide = 47%
Math: Laurens 55 = 22%, Statewide = 39%
Science: Laurens 55 = 31%, Statewide = 46%

6
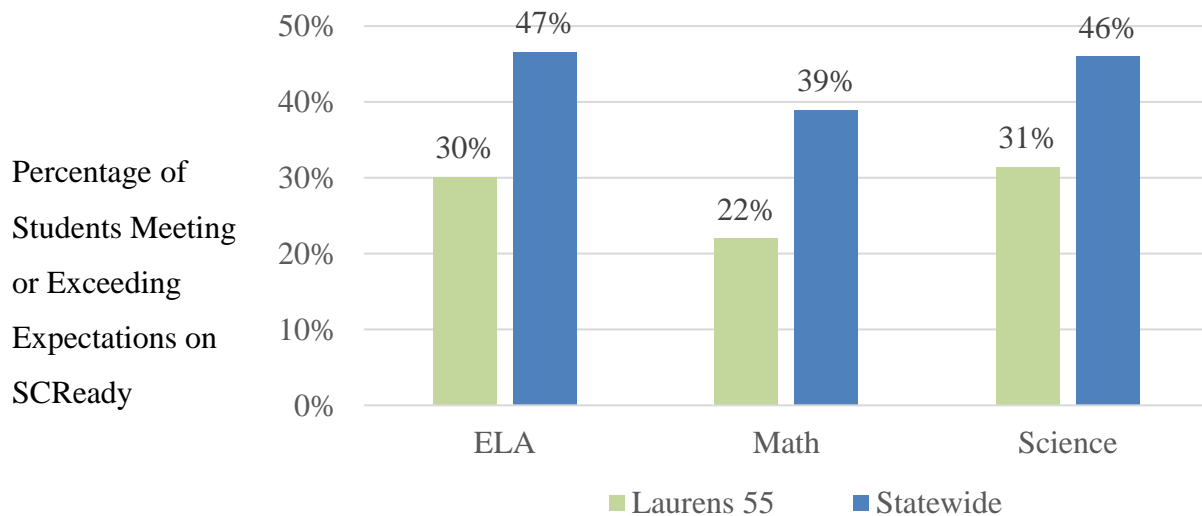
As a result, supporting students and educators in the post-pandemic landscape is a critical focus for Laurens County School District 55. The lingering effects of the pandemic have had a profound impact on schools, teachers, and student learning. In response, the district is actively adapting and prioritizing school structures that foster safe and inclusive environments, uphold rigorous classroom instruction with a focus on student agency, and provide social and emotional support for both teachers and students. The district has made significant investments in developing a comprehensive HCMS, but this TSL grant provides the opportunity for Laurens County School District 55 to leverage additional resources to support improved outcomes for teachers, school leaders, and students. Specifically, the district is seeking additional support for:

- Enhancing the training and support provided to new teachers from diverse preparation experiences: The district aims to improve its teacher training programs and ensure that new teachers receive comprehensive support tailored to their unique backgrounds. This will enable them to effectively meet the needs of a diverse student population and excel in their roles.

- Strengthening support for school leaders, leadership teams, and teachers in fostering students' character formation: The district recognizes the importance of character development in students and aims to provide increased support and resources to educators. This will empower them to cultivate students' character traits, values, and social-emotional skills, creating a well-rounded and thriving learning community.

By pursuing improvements in these areas, Laurens County School District 55 aims to establish innovative systems and structures that empower educators to deliver high-quality instruction, support student growth, and foster a positive and inclusive school culture (Competitive Preference Priority 2).

(ii) Build on similar efforts to improve relevant outcomes using existing funding streams

      <u>State policy and priorities alignment</u>. NIET partnered with the South Carolina Department of Education to develop the South Carolina Teaching Standards 4.0. These standards align to the NIET teaching standards, and support coaching and evaluation through the state ADEPT evaluation system. When the new standards were implemented in 2018-19, NIET was selected by the state to provide initial training to all teacher preparation providers in the new teaching standards and, subsequently, to all K-12 districts. Introducing the new standards to teacher preparation programs first turned out to be a highly effective strategy for the adoption of the standards, and NIET's high-quality training was a critical element. Through LEARNS, NIET will provide additional support to Laurens County School District 55 related to educator evaluation.

      In addition, newly-elected State Superintendent of Education Ellen Weaver proposed the creation of a bonus compensation program for teachers who agree to work in high-need schools with additional incentives for increases in student achievement. The work Laurens County School District 55 proposes through this grant will create a model for other districts in the state to align compensation systems with measures of performance. Additional information about the alignment of LEARNS to state policy and priorities can be found in Figure 3 and Appendix F1.

(iii) Part of a comprehensive effort to improve teaching and learning

      This proposal supports the implementation of the evidence-based TAP System and leverage its capabilities to drive all functions of the human capital management system. The collaboration between Laurens County School District 55 and NIET, a national nonprofit organization, will not only benefit the district but also provide valuable insights for the state and other districts seeking to establish a culture of high expectations and instructional improvement.

By partnering with NIET, which has a proven track record of success in implementing performance-based compensation systems and human capital management systems, Laurens County School District is poised to enhance the effectiveness of its teachers and school leaders, leading to improved academic outcomes for students, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

With the LEARNS project, the district will continue to refine its evaluation process, ensuring fairness, rigor, validity, reliability, and objectivity in assessing educator effectiveness. Multiple measures of performance, including student academic achievement, will be utilized to evaluate educators. The district will align elements of its human capital management system by integrating performance-based evaluation data that captures student growth, classroom practice, and leadership practice. Ongoing analysis of student performance and teacher evaluation data will guide professional development initiatives, where teacher and principal standards rubrics will be employed across various areas such as evaluation, coaching, induction, and mentoring.

The project also aims to leverage teacher leader roles and responsibilities to attract, develop, and retain a highly effective and diverse teaching workforce, providing career advancement opportunities based on effective performance. By implementing a comprehensive system that ensures coherence and improvement in instruction, the LEARNS project strives to promote equity, enhance teacher and leader effectiveness, and ultimately drive student achievement. Through this collaborative effort, Laurens County School District 55 intends to create a transformative educational environment that fosters equity, empowers educators, and maximizes student success.

B. Quality of the Project Design

(i) Demonstrates a rationale

The rationale behind LEARNS is that increases in teacher and school leader effectiveness will result from both increases in the skills of current educators as well as improved recruitment and retention of effective, diverse educators due to the combination of increased support and opportunities for leadership roles and additional compensation (i.e., Berry et al., 2010; Center for American Progress, 2014; Hudgens et al., 2020; Hudson, 2010). Drawing on this rationale, Laurens County School District 55 will develop coherent HCMS structures through a clear vision for improvement and a plan for continuing to build alignment across elements of the HCMS. Additionally, Laurens County School District 55 will establish systems to support educators and their professional growth through four research-based strategies that form the foundation of the TAP System and our school-level LEARNS strategies: 1) strengthen implementation of fair evaluations for educators that are coupled with specific and actionable feedback; 2) create formal opportunities for teacher career advancement; 3) provide job-embedded, teacher-led professional learning opportunities; 4) develop a system of performance-based compensation for teachers and school leaders, and 5) expand the district's vision for improvement and alignment of the HCMS. Together, these strategies form a project design that is aimed at improving teacher and school leader effectiveness and, as a result, raising student achievement.

The TAP System theory of action has an extensive record of effectiveness in supporting high-need districts in multiple states to increase student achievement. Examinations of the impact of the TAP System across several locations by different researchers using varied methodological frameworks consistently show its positive impacts on student and school

10

outcomes (Barnett & Wills, 2016; Cohodes et al., 2023; Eren, 2019; Leutscher et al., in press; Mann et al., 2013; Schacter & Thum, 2005; Solmon et al., 2007).

For example, one recent study conducted in South Carolina examined long-term impacts for eighth grade students enrolled in schools implementing the TAP System (Cohodes et al., 2023). Exposure to the TAP System in eighth grade was reported to have positive impacts on long-run educational attainment: 1) increased likelihood of twelfth grade enrollment and 2) increased likelihood of on-time high school graduation. TAP System exposure also had positive social benefits: 1) reduced arrest rates in adolescence and early adulthood and 2) less reliance on social welfare programs in adulthood. The benefits improved with more exposure to the TAP System: students exposed to the TAP System for four years had an improvement in twelfth grade enrollment rate more than three times that of students exposed for one year. Overall, the analyses of the impact of the TAP System showed that "it improved longer-term educational attainment and reduced criminal activity and dependence on government assistance for young people exposed to the program" (p. 26).

Another study in high-need schools in Louisiana found a positive effect on student math achievement during the second and third year of TAP implementation (Eren, 2019). By the third year, the effect was reported to be "roughly equal to the observed effect from a one standard deviation increase in teacher quality" (p. 880). The author identified TAP as a cost-effective program and suggested future incentive programs include elements of TAP such as 1) multiple performance metrics (e.g., instructional practices and student performance), 2) both individual- and group-based incentives, and 3) regular feedback to teachers about performance (Eren, 2019).

11

(ii) Relevant literature review, project implementation plan, and appropriate methods

The TAP System's theory of action is grounded in the literature (for a full list of the references, see Appendix F7). Studies conducted across multiple grade levels, multiple locations, and multiple years consistently demonstrate the positive impact of the TAP System on school leader (Hudgens & Barnett, 2017), teacher (Leutscher & Barnett, 2020; Logis et al., 2022), and student (Cohodes et al., 2023; Eren, 2019; Mann et al., 2013; Springer et al., 2014) outcomes. The positive impact of the TAP System can be attributed to its four elements – multiple career paths, ongoing applied professional growth, instructionally focused accountability, and performance-based compensation (PBC) – which both individually and as a whole have been shown to promote educational outcomes. A comprehensive approach to school reform that focuses on supportive structures for teachers has been shown to be highly effective for improving student achievement (Park et al., 2019).

Increasingly, schools are shifting away from traditional leadership structures toward an approach in which administrators work with teacher leaders to drive instructional improvements (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Teacher leadership roles, such as the mentor and master teacher roles in the TAP System's multiple career paths structure, allow effective teachers to utilize their expertise through modeling effective instruction and mentoring other teachers (Nguyen et al., 2020; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Moreover, studies show that teacher leadership is associated with positive school, teacher, and student outcomes, including school instructional improvement; teacher job satisfaction, self-esteem, effectiveness, and retention; and student achievement (Muijs & Harris, 2003; Schott et al., 2020; Shen et al., 2020; Snoek & Volman, 2014; Supovitz, 2018). These studies provide compelling evidence of teacher leadership's pivotal role in driving school improvement.

Effective teacher professional development is key for improving instructional practices and student outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Hill et al., 2022). The ongoing applied professional growth element of the TAP System adheres to the features of professional development that research has found to be effective: models effective practice, incorporates active learning, promotes collaboration among teachers, can be sustained over time, and relates to teacher needs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone et al., 2002). Indeed, research shows that teacher learning and student achievement increase when professional development is teacher-led, ongoing, collaborative, and relevant for teachers (Archibald et al., 2011; Bowgren & Sever, 2010; Doğan & Adams, 2018; Hill & Papay, 2022).

To improve classroom instruction, thorough assessment of teachers' practices that is coupled with high-quality feedback is essential. Studies show that teacher evaluation and support systems that include observation and follow-up feedback have positive effects on self-reflection and collaboration, instructional practices, and student performance (Kraft et al., 2020; Ritter & Barnett, 2016; Song et al., 2021; Therriault et al., 2020). Additionally, research shows that to be impactful, feedback needs to be specific, actionable, and objective (Frasier, 2022; Scheeler et al., 2004; Steinberg & Sartain, 2015; Taylor & Tyler, 2012; Thurlings et al., 2013; Tuma et al., 2018). The TAP System's instructionally focused accountability centers around implementing evaluation systems that include multiple observation and feedback cycles to improve instructional quality and student performance.

PBC is one strategy for HCMS that has been associated with improved teacher and student outcomes (Cohodes et al., 2023; Eren, 2019; Hanushek et al., 2023; Waynet et al., 2018). A report of a Teacher Incentive Fund program found that teachers in schools implementing PBC reported greater job satisfaction, had more improvement in observation scores, and had more

13

improvement in student achievement compared to teachers in control schools (Chiang et al., 2017). Additionally, a meta-analysis showed that the positive effects of teacher merit pay on student achievement were equivalent to about four additional weeks of learning (Pham et al., 2020). PBC in the TAP System aligns with the best practices identified in the literature including employing multiple performance measures (both individual and group/school), providing comprehensive individual feedback alongside professional development opportunities, fostering strong leadership, conducting reliable analysis of student performance, and offering substantial award amounts (Boyd et al., 2005; Chingos & West, 2012; Eren, 2019; Ritter & Barnett, 2013). Improvement at the school level requires districts to shift the role of the central office personnel as overseers to that of collaborators with educators to enact district initiatives and goals (Bjork & Blasé, 2009) and build their capacity for improvement (Honig et al., 2010). A district-level focus on instructional leadership has the potential to increase the effectiveness of principals (Goldring et al., 2018). A recent report showed that the impact of having an effective principal on student achievement is on par with the impact of having a similarly effective teacher (Grissom et al., 2021).

Project implementation plan. The partners in this grant have developed a high-quality plan for project implementation and successful achievement of objectives. Project strategies will be accomplished using key activities described in detail next (see Table 3 for an overview).

Table 3. Overview of LEARNS Strategies and Activities

Strategy	Key Activities
1. Strengthen the implementation of fair evaluations for	• Train and annually certify observers to conduct teacher and principal observations using valid rubrics • Schedule for multiple observation and feedback cycles for

14

educators that are coupled with specific and actionable feedback	• principals and teachers each year • Use observation and student data to purposefully plan professional development • Use evaluation data to inform teacher recruitment, retention, and placement decisions
2. Create formal opportunities for teacher career advancement	• Expand teacher leadership roles and responsibilities • Use teacher leader roles to attract and retain highly effective teachers and develop a leadership pipeline • Support teacher leaders through on-site, job-embedded coaching and training
3. Provide job-embedded, teacher-led professional learning opportunities	• Train instructional leadership teams to plan, deliver, monitor and improve job-embedded professional learning • Implement weekly collaborative learning for teachers through cluster meetings • Provide professional development for principals
4. Develop a system of performance-based compensation for teachers and school leaders	• Implement a teacher PBCS that is based on multiple performance metrics • Implement a principal PBCS that is based on multiple performance metrics
5. Expand the district's vision for improvement and alignment of the	• Align and expand HCMS elements to advance strategic goals • Integrate character education into HCMS improvements • Strengthen the capacity of leaders to engage stakeholders in the systems change process

HCMS	• Provide coaching for district leaders as they implement a multi-year plan for improving the HCMS

Strengthen the implementation of fair evaluations for educators that are coupled with specific and actionable feedback

Laurens School District 55 is committed to fostering a shared understanding of effective classroom teaching that aligns with student learning growth and promotes consistency in observation scores across classrooms and schools. To achieve this, comprehensive training will be provided to district leaders, school leaders, and teacher leaders, equipping them with the necessary skills to accurately utilize the South Carolina Teaching Standards 4.0 (Appendix F2) and the Program for Assisting, Developing, and Evaluating Principal Performance (PADEPP) Rubric (Appendix F3).

The evaluator training also provides district and school leaders with a structured approach to delivering high-quality feedback that directly influences instructional practices and student achievement. Through this process, teachers will receive both an area of reinforcement, acknowledging an area of strength, and an area of refinement, identifying an area for growth. Specific follow-up, coaching, and support will be provided in the classroom to strengthen teaching and learning. Furthermore, data on areas of growth will be analyzed to inform the design of weekly job-embedded professional development sessions (called cluster meetings n TAP schools) tailored to address these identified needs, providing teachers with ongoing learning opportunities.

Principal supervisors will engage in a comprehensive evaluation process to assess principal practice and support their professional growth. This process includes conducting

16

beginning, middle, and end-of-year conferences with school leaders, as well as completing two cycles of evidence/artifact collections and observations.

For classroom teachers and teacher leaders, multiple cycles of formal observation will be conducted, providing clear evidence of their instructional practices and the corresponding student learning outcomes. Within two days of each observation, an in-person post-conference will be held, delivering actionable feedback aimed at continuous improvement. These evaluation procedures ensure that principal supervisors and evaluators provide high-quality feedback that supports the development of both school leaders and teachers. The goal is to foster a culture of ongoing improvement and enhance the overall quality of teaching and learning in the district.

Create formal opportunities for teacher career advancement

The district will create two school-based roles: master teachers and mentor teachers. Master teachers will support approximately 15-20 classroom teachers, lead professional learning, conduct classroom observations and provide feedback, and participate in the school leadership team. Mentor teachers, while remaining in the classroom, will be released for a designated amount of time each week to collaborate with the master teacher to support professional learning, observe classroom practice, provide intentional support for new teachers, and serve on the school leadership team. Mentor teachers will support approximately 8-10 classroom teachers. These teacher leaders will be interviewed, hired, and trained in the first year of the grant.

One key LEARNS approach is to use teacher leader roles to attract and retain highly effective teachers and develop a leadership pipeline. The opportunity to receive high-quality support for improvement is a strong tool for recruiting effective teachers, as are leadership roles that enable teachers to remain connected to the classroom while playing a role in school leadership. Formal leadership roles enable teacher leaders to influence their colleagues to engage

17

in instructional improvement (Supovitz, 2018). This creates a pipeline of leadership in schools, with effective classroom teachers moving into mentor or master roles as well as administrator positions. Strategic and intentional recruitment activities will be guided and supported by district and school leaders.

Provide job-embedded, teacher-led professional learning opportunities

Laurens County School District 55 will work with NIET to train school leaders to lead a high-functioning, school-wide Instructional Leadership Team (ILT), which is essential to the success of the TAP System. The ILT, led by the principal and joined by teacher leaders, develops the school plan for improving student learning. NIET's training builds the capacity of ILTs to manage and implement research-driven practices, utilize high-impact levers for improving instruction, lead collaborative learning teams, conduct meaningful observations and ensure all teachers benefit from individual coaching. District leaders will participate in the training, since they play an important role in reviewing existing practices and expenditures to ensure that school-based, job embedded professional learning is the primary mechanism for teacher professional learning.

The Project Director, in collaboration with NIET, will provide intensive, practice-based training for teacher leaders to enable them to provide high-quality professional learning for classroom teachers (Competitive Preference Priority 1). Training and support visits in year one will focus on learning recovery and acceleration, to address immediate classroom needs. In addition, teacher leaders will be trained to lead weekly collaborative professional learning teams, analyze teacher and student data, identify and field test student learning strategies, and develop coaching plans for classroom teachers. This intensive core training will occur during the first year of the grant.

18

Develop a system of performance-based compensation for teachers and school leaders

The TAP System supports districts to use performance-based compensation for high-performing teacher leaders who lead professional learning for groups of teachers as well as provide coaching and support for individual classroom teachers in their schools. Master teachers and mentor teachers receive salary augmentations ($7,00 and $4,000, respectively) for taking on additional responsibilities. The use of teacher leaders allows the district to better provide all teachers with high-quality opportunities to improve their skills, which in turn, will be rewarded with performance-based compensation.

Additionally, all educators will be able to earn performance-based compensation based on 1) observations ratings and 2) student growth.

Teacher observation ratings are based on ratings on the two state-approved

To determine the measure(s) for student growth, the district will form a Performance-based Compensation System Committee. This committee will be responsible for overseeing the alignment of PBCS measures with the district's mission, goals, and objectives. The committee will play a crucial role in communicating the functioning of the PBCS to key stakeholders, including teachers, school leaders, and other relevant personnel. They will provide clarity on how PBC will be calculated and distributed, fostering transparency and understanding throughout the process. Another important task of the committee will be to monitor the timely calculation and distribution of performance awards. By ensuring accuracy and efficiency in this area, they will contribute to the overall success of the PBCS.

Finally, the committee will actively explore how the PBCS can complement other incentives within the larger Human Capital Management System (HCMS) strategy. This

19

collaborative approach will maximize the effectiveness of the various components of the HCMS, leading to enhanced outcomes for educators and students alike.

Expand the district's vision for improvement and alignment of the HCMS

Laurens will engage NIET to provide coaching and training for district leaders to plan for effective implementation in order to 1) assess district structures and create a plan for aligning elements of their HCMS to district goals; 2) strengthen evaluation processes to produce valid and reliable measures of teacher and principal performance; 3) identify key decision points where performance data will drive HCMS decisions including recruitment, hiring, placement, retention, career advancement, and dismissal; and 4) refine a strategic compensation plan that will advance a more effective staffing structure and more diverse faculty in schools.

The district sees a growing opportunity to strengthen the support provided to educators, so that they can help their students build a well-rounded skill set, including often less emphasized character traits such as autonomy, curiosity, judgment, reasoning, and resourcefulness. Laurens County School District 55 and NIET will work collaboratively to support teachers effectively integrating and delivering character education within the classroom environment. Programmatic solutions have offered short-term triage as schools seek to recover learning loss and navigate virtual learning situations; however, educators are needing support that will build systems centered on research-based best practices and sound teaching to embed character and social-emotional learning support within their work without adding more to their plate. Laurens County School District's solution to this is to integrate character education into HCMS improvements.

Supporting teacher educators requires a collaborative effort that begins at the district level. This is even more true for supporting new teachers who are making the transition from

preparation to practice. Laurens County School District 55 is committed to support induction

efforts through this collaborative effort in an effort to establish structures and a network of

support that builds the confidence of new teachers as professional educators. NIET will support

this work by ensuring the individuals supporting induction have knowledge of effective

instructional practices, high-quality strategies to coach novice teachers, and create opportunities

for collaborative learning through program design (i.e., cluster meetings). NIET will support

Laurens County School District 55 to identify current practices, areas of strength, and

opportunities for improvement; establish a timeline for implementation and recommended

training and consultation needs; and prioritize professional learning based on needs.

(iii) Evaluation methods provide performance feedback and permit periodic assessment

The project evaluation will be led by NIET's Research and Evaluation Department, a

department with extensive experience supporting large-scale evaluations of education

programs (Appendix B: Resumes of Key Personnel). The evaluator will work collaboratively

to lead a formative and summative evaluation with two purposes: 1) to supply the grant

partner with timely data to improve the project for the populations served and 2) to assess

program impacts. The evaluation plan aligns with the project's logic model stating that if

programmatic structures, trainings, and supports are put in place at the district and school

level to help strengthen and align district HCMS, there will be 1) an increase in teacher

effectiveness, 2) an increase in school leader effectiveness, and 3) improvement in student

achievement. The evaluation plan (Appendix F6) is organized around four research

questions aligned with the nine Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 measures;

it will serve as a working document to ensure the project is on track to meet objectives.

The project's logic model (Appendix A) will be used to communicate clearly the inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes expected from the intervention. The evaluator will identify program implementation measures and data collection instruments that can be embedded into the program delivery (such as systems for tracking training session attendance and engagement) as well as data reporting systems that can be used to drive continuous monitoring and improvement of program implementation. The evaluator will track program progress and analyze fidelity of implementation (Research Question [RQ] 1: How is the project being implemented and to what extent is implementation sustainable?). Qualitative data used to assess fidelity of implementation will include program artifacts, surveys, and interviews with partners. NIET's annual school review process, which consists of classroom, ILT, and PLC observations, will serve as one of these critical data sources for assessing fidelity of implementation and providing feedback to district and school leaders.

Each year, the evaluator will interview school and district personnel to assess perceived quality of the program and program impact. To ensure reliability and validity, interview responses will be used in combination with a review of documents and system reports. This data triangulation allows for a higher level of validity in the qualitative research process. Interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and coded by at least two researchers. This work, along with analyses of implementation fidelity measures, will help identify key variables that impact implementation.

Qualitative and quantitative data will also be used to address the remaining research questions about program impact (RQ2: What are the effects of participation in the project on teacher outcomes? RQ3: What are the effects of participation in the project on principal and other school leader outcomes? RQ4: What are the effects of participation in the project on

22

student achievement?). In addition to interview and survey data, the evaluator will obtain longitudinal administrative data from the district and the state. These data will include administrative records (e.g., position vacancies, new hires, and teacher and school leader demographics), retention rates and evaluation ratings for teachers and school leaders, and student outcomes (primarily student achievement).

The evaluation will incorporate regular communication between the evaluator, key project personnel, and the district through quarterly update meetings to review plans, progress, and preliminary data. As detailed in the evaluation plan, the evaluator will provide timely summaries of findings from analyses of program implementation and impact data. For example, program data and artifacts will be discussed during monthly meetings with the project director, and educator effectiveness and student achievement data will be examined and shared with the district and other key personnel annually. At the conclusion of the grant, the evaluator will assess the overall accomplishment of goals and conduct a thorough analysis of lessons learned.

Laurens County School District 55 and NIET will disseminate reports at the local, state, and national levels through presentations, professional conferences, academic journals, and print and online media. At the **local level**, NIET and the district will establish quarterly communications to monitor progress, ensure implementation is on track, address any challenges they may be facing, and share the results of the project. Additionally, NIET's Communications team will work with the district to promote the success of its schools in local media. Ongoing communications efforts will build awareness, understanding, and support for the PBCS and educator evaluation systems among teachers, principals, other school personnel, and the community. In addition, the district will disseminate information

23

through its newsletters, website, Teacher Advisory Council meetings, and other public forums throughout the year (Appendix F8: Communications). Other communication outreach will include the Parent Nights and Listen and Learns (which includes parents and community members) and board presentations. NIET will provide opportunities for the district to share the results at the national level through NIET annual conferences, research and policy reports, and social media.

At the **state level**, information about project implementation and findings will be shared with community stakeholders in South Carolina through presentations at regional meetings or conferences (e.g., Eastern Educational Research Association). Finally, at the **national level**, the project results will be presented at the annual NIET National Conference, at least two professional research conferences (e.g., American Educational Research Association; National Forum to Advance Rural Education), and at the meetings with policymakers and legislators. NIET has previously shared its most promising findings in Washington, D.C. during Congressional Hearings and meetings with policymakers, legislators, and other advocates for educator quality, and it will continue to do so to inform policy and impact educational reform. Findings will also be disseminated via public repositories (e.g., the Public Domain Clearinghouse on Communities360, a portal for the U.S. Department of Education's Effective Education Development grantee communities), NIET publications, including research briefs, reports, and newsletters posted on the website and publicized in social media, and professional journals. The evaluator will also incorporate findings into the annual performance reports to address progress toward key performance measures.

C. Quality of the Management Plan

Laurens County School District will serve as the fiscal agent for the proposed TSL grant. The district has served successfully as the fiscal agent for grants and will utilize these experiences and strategies to implement the proposed grant's clearly defined responsibilities and milestones on time and within budget. The district has the capacity and expertise within its team to successfully implement the proposed project (Table 4, Appendix B).

Table 4. Project Team Key Personnel

Personnel	Qualification & Duties	% FTE
██████████ Principal Investigator	████████ will serve as principal investigator. She will lead overall grant execution and provide oversight for financial, administrative, and compliance matters.	5%
██████████ Project Director	████████ will serve as the grant's project director. She will provide direct oversight to the project and monitor program implementation and the quality of training and support.	50%
██████ Finance	████████ will support financial aspects of the grant, and will be responsible for processing payments and monitoring spending on the grant.	20%
███████████ Executive Director	████████████ will serve as the executive director of elementary education for this grant. Jennifer will be responsible supporting effective instruction.	30%

The proposed grant's project team is extremely qualified with the necessary skills, abilities, and experience to carry out this work successfully from implementation to evaluation, reporting, and fiscal management. Key project personnel will be responsible for ensuring that project tasks are completed on time and all milestones are met.

Table 5 is organized around three key components: 1) the project milestones and tasks, 2) key personnel who will perform these tasks, and 3) timeline for completing them. The milestones described on Table 5 are aligned to the logic model (Appendix A) and project description within Section B, including each of the five project strategies represented as S1-S5. The responsible party column denotes who will lead each milestone or key task, and includes: District Administration (DA), Project Director (PDs), school leaders (SL), teacher leaders (TL), and NIET. Quarter 1 begins in October of each year. Milestones are in bold and the activities to meet those milestones are in plain text

Table 5. Milestone and Key Tasks Summary

Milestones (bold)	Responsible	Quarter			
Key Tasks to meet each milestone (connection to Strategy 1-5)	Party	1	2	3	4
Year 1 - Milestones and Key Tasks					
Complete Project Start-up					
Establish TSL Advisory Board (S5)	PD	✓			
Kickoff meeting with district leadership (S5)	PD, DA, NIET	✓			
Provide data-driven implementation workshops (S1-S4)	PD, DA, NIET	✓			
Establish PBCS Committee (S4, S5)	PD	✓			
Hire communications manager & develop communications plan (S5)	PD		✓		
Establish Project Advisory Committees and Schedules					

26

TSL Advisory Board meetings (quarterly) (S5)	PD, DA, NIET	✓	✓	✓	✓
PBCS Committee meetings (quarterly) (S4, S5)	PD, DA,		✓	✓	✓
Establish cluster schedule for 2023-24 (S3)	SL, PD, DA	✓			
Hire Master Teachers					
Establish committee for master teacher selection (S1)	PD, NIET		✓		
Recruit, interview, hire master teachers (S1)	PD, SL, DA			✓	
Deliver Foundational Training					
CORE Training on elements of the HCMS (evaluation, professional learning, goal setting, instructional leadership, differentiated support for new and under certified teachers) (S1-S5)	NIET, DA, SL	✓	✓	✓	✓
NIET National Conference and Summer Institute (S1-S3)	PD, DA, SL, TL		✓	✓	
Deliver Annual Coaching and Support					
Provide on-site school support and coaching (monthly) (S1-4)	NIET	✓	✓	✓	✓
Provide district support (bimonthly) (S4)	NIET	✓	✓	✓	✓
Collaborative learning group for school leaders (quarterly) (S2)	PD, DA, NIET		✓	✓	✓
Collaborative learning group for teacher leaders (quarterly) (S2)	PD, SL, NIET		✓	✓	✓
Begin TAP Implementation for school year 2023-24					
Teacher observations, cluster meetings, ILT meetings (S1-3)	SL, TL	✓	✓	✓	✓
School leader and ILT observations, goal setting (S1-3)	SL, TL	✓	✓	✓	✓
School Reviews (S1-5)	NIET			✓	
Complete Project Monitoring and Evaluation Tasks					
Baseline data collection (observation, survey, interview, student	PD, Research	✓			

27

growth) (S4, S5)					
Implementation and quality assurance meetings (monthly) (S1-5)	PD, SS, LEAs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Calculate and Award Performance-based Compensation					
PBCS Committee meetings (quarterly) (S4, S5)	PD, DA	✓	✓	✓	✓
Enter PBC data into data management system (S4)	PD, SL			✓	✓
Calculate PBC awards for teachers and school leaders (S4)	PD, DA			✓	✓
Award PBC for teachers and school leaders (S4)	DA				✓
Years 2 and 3 – Milestones and Tasks					
Conduct Project Advisory Committees (Hire as needed)					
TSL Advisory Board meetings (quarterly) (S1)	PD, DA, NIET	✓	✓	✓	✓
Recruit, interview, hire new teacher leaders (if necessary) (S3)	DA, SL			✓	✓
Continue Delivering Trainings					
Quarterly trainings with master teachers (S2 S3)	PD, NIET	✓	✓	✓	✓
Quarterly trainings with school leaders (S1-3)	PD, NIET	✓	✓	✓	✓
Quarterly training to provide differentiated support for new and under certified teachers	PD, NIET	✓	✓	✓	✓
NIET National Conference and Summer Institute (S1-3, S5)	PD, DA, SL, TL			✓	✓
Deliver Annual Coaching and Support					
Provide on-site school support and coaching (monthly) (S1-3, S5)	NIET	✓	✓	✓	✓
Provide district support (bi-monthly) (S5)	NIET	✓	✓	✓	✓
Master teacher meeting (quarterly) (S2)	PD, NIET		✓	✓	✓
Continue TAP Implementation for school years 2024-25 and 2025-26					

Task	Responsible				
Teacher observations, cluster meetings, ILT meetings (S1-3)	SL, TL	✓	✓	✓	✓
School leader and ILT observations, goal setting (S1-3)	SL, TL	✓	✓	✓	✓
School Reviews (S1-5)	PD, SS			✓	
Calculate and Award Performance-based Compensation					
PBCS Committee meetings (quarterly) (S4, S5)	PD	✓	✓	✓	✓
Enter PBC data into data management system (S1, S4)	PD, SL	✓	✓	✓	✓
Calculate PBC awards for teachers and school leaders (S4)	PD, DA			✓	✓
Award PBC for teachers and school leaders (S4, S5)	DA				✓
Complete Project Monitoring and Evaluation Tasks					
Implementation and quality assurance meetings (monthly) (S1-5)	PD, DA, NIET	✓	✓	✓	✓
Data collection (observation, survey, interview, growth) (S1-5)	PD, Research			✓	✓
Analyze data for human capital decisions (S1, S4, S5)	PD, DA, SL		✓	✓	

D. Adequacy of Resources

(i) The likelihood that the proposed project will result in system change or improvement

Laurens County School District 55 has a clear vision for the systems improvement we will achieve through the TSL grant. We have in place key elements for success including the fact that multiple educators within the district have experience successfully implementing the TAP System and the School Board and community leaders are committed to this work, as noted in the included letters of support.

The LEARNS project will build on this foundation to create a high-quality HCMS that supports improvement in student outcomes. This project will result in systems change at three levels. First, the LEARNS project will create change in classroom practice through: 1) multiple

29

measures of teaching and learning to provide the data to set goals and monitor progress, 2)

weekly collaborative learning teams led by trained teacher leaders that provide job-embedded

professional learning tied to specific classroom challenges, and 3) individual instructional

coaching to provide teachers with hands-on guidance as they implement student learning

strategies and improve their practice. School leadership teams build overall instructional

leadership capacity to drive school-level change, including using data to set goals, designing

professional learning, and ensuring that coaching and feedback are having an impact. District

leadership teams create direct communication and collaboration among central office staff

working to support district-level change and coordinate these changes in the schools they

support. This coordination is enhanced as district leaders plan and deliver training for school

leaders and use observation and feedback along with school visits to create a consistent and

coherent message for principals about priorities and goals.

 (ii) Build local capacity that address the needs of the target population

LEARNS will prioritize building local capacity to provide, improve, and expand services

that address responding districts' teacher, school leader, and student needs. Using the District

Instructional Framework (Appendix F4), with its clearly defined indicators for instructional

excellence, NIET will support district leaders in improving district practices and embedding

those improvements in existing structures and systems to ensure sustainability. To strengthen

district systems of instructional support for schools, NIET will collaborate with Laurens County

School District 55 in identifying high-impact action steps to improve instruction and provide

coaching for district leaders aligned to those action steps. In addition, NIET will support Laurens

County School District 55 in establishing district-level structures for delivering professional

learning and coaching for school and teacher leaders.

The district leadership team (DLT) provides a critical focal point for strategic support for schools – bringing together central office leaders with different portfolios or areas of focus to work collaboratively to create coherence in these initiatives at the school level.

Support for school leaders includes quarterly collaborative meetings initially led by NIET that will later be facilitated by a member of the DLT and focused on specific areas for improvement based on school visits and observations. This collaborative work helps to extend strong practices and develop a shared commitment to district goals while building leadership capacity. Through these meetings, principals will develop a more consistent approach to evaluating classroom practice, reinforcing expectations across buildings. Teacher leaders attend similar collaborative quarterly meetings led by NIET and a designated DLT leader. Quarterly master teacher meetings provide opportunities to address shared problems of practice based on teacher and student needs and develop strategies for supporting more effective professional learning teams at the school level. Master teachers will work together to calibrate their understanding of strong instruction, creating consistency across the district. This systematic approach of targeted support builds capacity at all levels, including acting as a strong influencing factor in teachers' decisions to apply to and remain in jobs in Laurens County School District 55.

(iii) Resources to operate the project beyond the length of the grant

Laurens County School District's Superintendent has experience in creating long-term funding for this work and has convened senior leaders in the district to create a multi-year financial sustainability and management plan. The district is currently using existing districts funds to support ongoing implementation of some of the project components, and will continue to use these funds moving forward. Funds that are currently being used, and will continue to be used, include local funding and Title II(A) funding. In addition, the district will aggressively

31

pursue other streams of funding that support all efforts to improve educator effectiveness.

The long-term sustainability and success plan for this project includes building collective buy-in, creating capacity through training and support, increasing educator skills and driving student growth, and establishing financial sustainability. The project is exceeding the 50% match requirement through in-kind time and effort of the districts' career teachers and school leaders. Additionally, NIET is providing in-kind support each year of the grant. The transition of the structure of the school day to support cluster meeting schedules, personnel time and effort, and implementation of the HCMS make up the in-kind contribution, thereby demonstrating district commitment to implementing the system in the long-run. In addition, Laurens County School District 55 will continue to review other expenditures to determine if funds can be shifted as the improvements supported by the project show impact.