

For Release
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Nonprofit partnership expands support for Arkansas rural school districts and teachers

This school year, the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) and Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators (AAEA) are expanding on efforts started in January 2021 to enhance support for students and teachers in rural Arkansas. The Arkansas Rural Educator Network (AREN) is supported through a \$4.85 million grant from the Walton Family Foundation and is designed to provide customized professional learning for educators over the course of three years. Altogether, 25 school districts in Arkansas – all of whom are located in rural and remote parts of the state – are now being served by this partnership as it enters its second year.

AREN was established to build instructional leadership, strengthen virtual instruction, and advance implementation of high-quality curriculum in rural schools during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. The network of rural districts provides an opportunity for educators from across the state to collaborate and develop communities of practice, as well as receive personalized support from NIET senior specialists.

"The collaborative opportunities that this network provides are invaluable for educators in rural districts across the state," said Dr. Mike Hernandez, executive director of AAEA. "This partnership is advancing the strong practices that are already happening in Arkansas classrooms, and students will ultimately benefit from this work for years to come."

"Educators in rural Arkansas are dedicated to providing the highest quality instruction for their students, and we saw that during year 1 of this network," said Laura Encalade, co-president of NIET. "There is a need to continue investing in teachers and building educator capacity in rural areas, especially now after two challenging school years, and we are thrilled to expand this initiative to even more districts in 2021-22. This initiative helps teachers and leaders to take their work to the next level."

In year 1, school and district leaders in 12 rural districts received professional learning and support throughout the year focused on principal development, learning recovery and acceleration, teacher leadership, high-quality instructional materials, and virtual instruction. Each district received a strengths-based needs assessment to determine strong practices and areas to focus on for additional professional development. NIET senior specialists provided a customized, district-specific plan of support, as well as onsite coaching and training tailored to educator and student needs. Additionally, participating districts collaborated monthly as a group to share strategies and learn together.

In year 2, an additional 14 school districts are joining the network. Earlier this year, NIET surveyed AREN partners from year 1 of the network, and 100% of responding districts indicated that they were satisfied with the professional learning provided to teachers, school leaders, and district leaders.



2021-22 Arkansas Rural Educator Network Districts		
Academics Plus*	Harrisburg*	Marvell-Elaine*
Blevins	Heber Springs	Mayflower*
Brinkley*	Helena-West Helena	Osceola*
Cross County	Hope*	Pangburn
Camden Fairview*	Hoxie	Southside
Decatur*	Jessieville	Trumann*
Drew Central	Junction City*	Waldron*
Foreman*	Lighthouse Academies*	
Fountain Lake	Magazine	
* New in year 2 (2021-22)		

NIET specialists are conducting strengths-based needs assessments with districts this fall to pinpoint strengths and continue to create customized professional learning, with the goal of fostering educator capacity to provide strong instruction that meets the unique needs of their students. Monthly network meetings will continue to bring district leaders together to collaborate and share strategies and new learning throughout the year.

For updates and more information about AREN, visit [NIET.org](https://www.niet.org).