

# Implementing the Instructional Partnership Initiative



The Instructional Partnership Initiative (IPI) is a collaborative approach to teacher professional learning that has improved Tennessee teachers' evaluation scores, teacher views of the evaluation system, and student test scores. IPI offers a unique approach to high-quality professional development through personalized professional learning, built-in flexibility, and data-based collaboration.

## How does IPI work?



The Tennessee Department of Education uses **evaluation data** to provide principals with suggested teacher partnerships based on specific observation indicators, pairing teachers with lower scores in specific indicators with colleagues in the same school who have scored high in the same areas.



These indicators serve as a focus for **collaborative partnerships** aimed at improving specific teaching practices. Partner teachers work collaboratively throughout the year, engaging in activities such as peer observations and feedback.



Principals can modify the teacher matches, and teachers can choose their own activities. This built-in flexibility ensures the partnerships are centered on the **needs of the schools and teachers** involved.

## What do partners do?



Teachers receive a guidebook with suggestions for how to structure their partnership, but all activities are completely up to them. Suggestions include meeting regularly (at least once per month), observing each other's classrooms and giving feedback, and lesson planning.

## Best Practices for Principals in IPI: Two Case Studies

What follows are two case studies based on research visits that studied the implementation of the Instructional Partnership Initiative (IPI). Vanderbilt researchers interviewed principals and teachers throughout Tennessee to understand IPI implementation and the school contexts that supported quality implementation. Over the course of two years, researchers visited 28 schools in all regions of the state. In each school, researchers interviewed the principal and six participating teachers and conducted a focus group of non-participating teachers to understand the broader perspective of collaboration and improvement activities in these schools. From these interviews, the research identified five best practices that contributed to effective implementation of IPI.

**These best practices for principals are:**

**1** Provide teachers with a motivation for engaging in professional learning partnerships

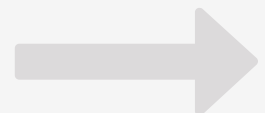
**2** Focus IPI partnerships on specific instructional indicators from the observation rubric

**3** Clarify expectations for IPI partner engagement

**4** Sustain teachers' attention on their collaborative partnerships

**5** Support teachers in finding time for IPI work

In the following case studies, we describe specific instances of IPI implementation in two different schools. We pay particular attention to how each of the principals in these schools exemplified these best practices.



## CASE STUDY #1

## Raritan County High School

Raritan County High School<sup>1</sup> has about 500 students and is nestled in a valley, 65 miles from the nearest large city. The principal, Mrs. Foster, described the faculty as committed to the school's students and larger community. Most of the teachers had been there for many years. At the same time, she took the place of a principal who left unexpectedly, a transition that caused some turmoil at the start of the school year. When Mrs. Foster heard about the IPI, she thought the focus on collaboration could help to rebuild the school culture after the previous year's turnover. She also recognized that many teachers were eager to improve their own teacher evaluation scores and said they had little support to do so in the past.

When Mrs. Foster looked at the suggested teacher matches, she saw six suggested target teachers, one of whom was no longer in the school. For the other five target teachers, she considered the personalities of the teachers and selected from the proposed partner list the teachers who would work well together. Many of the matches were not in the same content area, but since the school had common planning by subject area that already fostered collaboration, Mrs. Foster thought the teachers would benefit from a different perspective.

At the beginning of the year, Mrs. Foster briefly mentioned IPI at a faculty meeting as a professional learning initiative, and noted that some teachers would be asked to participate. In her introduction, she described IPI as **an integral part of her goal to establish a collaborative and learning-focused climate in the school.** In the next week, Mrs. Foster met with each pair of teachers to establish each partnership and provide more information about IPI. She also emphasized that their work should **focus on a particular instructional indicator from the observation rubric** where one partner had room to grow and the other had demonstrated particular strength. Specifically, Mrs. Foster gave each partnership one indicator, identified from the suggested match list and explained that it should serve as the focus of their work. For example, Mrs. Foster invited two partner teachers, a ninth grade English teacher and tenth grade social studies teacher, to a meeting and explained that she wanted them to work together on questioning because the social studies teacher had struggled in questioning the previous year and the English teacher had expertise using high-quality questions during instruction.

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<sup>1</sup>All names are pseudonyms.

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In these meetings, she provided **clear expectations** for teachers on how to engage in IPI, asking them to meet at least once a month and to at least observe each other and co-plan a lesson in addition to any other activities they wanted to do. Further, Mrs. Foster highlighted different parts of the teacher guidebook provided by the state, suggesting they skip the “getting to know you” activity since they had been colleagues for so long, and said that she would check in informally with them twice a semester.

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Mrs. Foster had few additional resources to offer teachers to support their IPI work and help them **find time for IPI activities**. Because IPI partners were not in the same department, most had different planning times, which allowed them to use their planning time to observe each other, although they had to use time outside of the school day to meet. To reduce the burden on the teachers, she exempted IPI teachers from hall monitoring duties on certain days of the week. While this time was not enough to fully account for the time they spent with their IPI partner, teachers said they appreciated the reduction in responsibilities.

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Mrs. Foster took a “hands off” approach so teachers would feel the freedom to make IPI work for them, but also felt it was important to check in periodically with the IPI partners to learn from them how the work was progressing and to **sustain teacher engagement in IPI**. So, she would periodically find the time, whether in the hall, teachers’ lounge, her office, or wherever, to check in on the participating teachers. When one teacher shared that her partner kept postponing meetings, she met privately with the other teacher to address his concerns. In her post-observation meetings in the spring, she asked each IPI partner what they learned through the IPI process, as well as whether and how they changed their instruction as a result of working with their IPI partner. When she saw improvement on their focal instructional indicator, she made note of it and celebrated with both teachers, and shared about this approach in professional learning with the faculty in end-of-year remarks.

IPI teachers in Raritan appreciated Mrs. Foster’s balance between support and autonomy. They described clear expectations and knew what they should be doing with their IPI partner. Nearly all teachers met the expectations she set out, observing each other several times and providing input on their partners’ lessons. Teachers described IPI as allowing them to go deeper in their instructional conversations with peers, more so than traditional forms of professional development or professional learning community activities. One teacher saw his evaluation score on his focus indicator improve dramatically and attributed that improvement to his IPI partnership. Most teachers saw value in IPI and looked forward to participating again next year.

## CASE STUDY #2

## East River Elementary School

East River Elementary School has 550 students in grades K–5 and is located in a mid-size city. Ms. Moore was in her fourth year as principal and had been encouraging peer observation among teachers for several years, with limited success. When she learned about the IPI, she saw it as a means to achieve her goals of developing a learning community where teachers feel comfortable observing and learning from each other.

Ms. Moore wanted to build a learning community around observation and collaboration. While she saw great value in IPI, she was also concerned that only including the seven suggested target teachers and their partners would create a stigma around IPI. Recognizing that the school’s mentoring program could have more of an instructional focus, she decided to merge IPI with the mentoring. For the seven suggested target IPI teachers, Ms. Moore matched them with a partner from the state-provided match list and noted these teachers would collaborate around a particular indicator from the evaluation rubric. When choosing the partner from amongst the suggestions, she prioritized teachers who were in the same grade level because it would allow partners to use common planning time for IPI activities. For the five new teachers in the school, she assigned them a mentor who was not participating in IPI. With just over half the teachers participating in some type of partnership, Ms. Moore thought IPI could support a stronger teacher learning community.

Ms. Moore announced that many teachers would be participating in collaborative partnerships this year at a faculty meeting. She explained her **goal of fostering peer observations and collaborative learning**. She did not mention IPI was an initiative organized by the Tennessee Department of Education because she did not want her teachers to think this was just another state mandate they had to follow, and instead described it as a professional learning experience that she was encouraging in the school. Teachers in this school did not refer to “IPI,” but instead spoke about their “collaborative partner.” After that announcement, Ms. Moore met individually with each teacher in IPI. In these meetings, which lasted about 20 minutes each, she explained her goals and expectations for the partnerships. As far as materials, she collated several pages from the teacher guidebook provided by the state, including the goal setting activity, peer observation form, and log, but did not give teachers the entire guidebook, since she thought it was too overwhelming. She also told each teacher who their

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partner would be and gave **each teacher a slip of paper specifying the instructional indicators** on which she wanted them to focus. For IPI teachers, these were the indicators on which the target teacher needed to improve, and the partner teacher had expertise. For the new teachers, she asked them to choose one indicator on which they wanted to focus.

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To **clarify expectations**, she told teachers to meet with their partner once a month and do three peer observations each semester. She told teachers the only thing she needed from them was the one-page log at the end of each semester with brief descriptions of the activities they completed together.

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Ms. Moore used several strategies to **sustain teachers' attention on their collaborative partnerships**. About once a month, she mentioned the collaborative partnerships in her weekly email to teachers. The first month was a reminder for teachers to meet with their partner. The next month she highlighted two teachers who were making changes in their classroom after observing their partner. During a faculty in-service day later in the year, she facilitated a conversation about what participating teachers were learning.

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Since most teachers had partners in their grade level, they shared planning time and were in the same Professional Learning Community (PLC), which met weekly. To **find time for partners to meet**, Ms. Moore said that one PLC a month would be dedicated to collaborative partner work (i.e., IPI). Given that partners had similar schedules, Ms. Moore's expectation for observation required teachers to find time to observe each other, something they reportedly struggled to accomplish. The school had several teacher aides, and most teachers used them to cover their classes in order to observe one another. Ms. Moore even covered a few classes herself while teachers observed their partners. One pair decided they would make use of a video camera and record their lesson for their partner to watch later.

Teachers in East River Elementary enjoyed working with their collaborative partner and most described learning several new strategies they used in their classroom. Teachers liked observing another teacher and seeing how they enacted similar standards in a somewhat different way. They appreciated the flexibility that Ms. Moore provided, offering options for their collaborative partnership work, which helped them to meet their self-identified needs as a teacher. Most teachers said that even though they already collaborated with their partner through grade-level meetings, the collaborative partnership allowed them to focus on particular needs they had as an individual teacher and to engage in focused reflection around those needs. For example, several teachers said they spent more time talking about their instructional practice as teachers with their collaborative partner, rather than needs of individual students, which was often the focus of their PLCs.

## Enacting the Best Practices

Mrs. Foster and Ms. Moore made different choices as they implemented IPI in their schools due to the context of their school and their specific goals for participating in IPI. Despite these differences in details, they both exemplified best practices. The principals had slightly different reasons for participating in IPI, but when introducing IPI to teachers, they provided teachers with a motivation for engaging in professional learning partnerships. Whether they met with partners together or each teacher individually, both principals ensured that partners were focused on the specific instructional indicator(s) on which they were matched. When setting expectations for what teachers should do with their IPI partner, Ms. Moore focused on peer observation and Mrs. Foster asked for both observation and lesson planning. Both principals ensured that participating teachers knew what was expected of them and how she would check in on their partnership. Both principals also tried to find time for partners to engage with each other. Most partners in East River Elementary had shared planning time while partners in Raritan mostly did not, but both principals provided what resources they had available to allow partners both to observe each other and to meet. Finally, each principal found a way to sustain teacher engagement in IPI and to demonstrate an investment in the partnerships, whether by informally checking in through brief encounters once a month, post-observation meetings, weekly emails to teachers, or faculty meetings.