



Effective Teaching in the K–12 Online Learning Environment

Collaborating to Develop a Research-Based
Evaluation Rubric

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K¹² Partners with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching

Most states have comprehensive teacher evaluation systems that use specific criteria to define the qualities of effective teachers. These evaluation systems apply to traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms. Many states, however, have introduced innovations in online education and virtual schooling, from kindergarten through high school. In the still-developing field of online education, it is vital to articulate criteria that specifically apply to effective teaching in a virtual learning environment.

To this end, K12 Inc., a national leader in pre-secondary online education, has partnered with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) to develop a researched-based rubric that can serve as the basis for evaluation, coaching, and teacher development in virtual learning environments, including those implemented in the network of K¹²-managed public schools.¹

¹K12 Inc. offers charter and district school management services as well as curriculum, technology tools, teacher staffing and training, and administrative support.

Why did K¹² partner with NIET?

Because of K¹²'s commitment to increasing teacher effectiveness in the virtual learning environment, we chose to partner with NIET, renowned for its work in building evaluation rubrics and comprehensive evaluation systems.

Founded in 1999, NIET is credited with developing TAP™: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement. TAP has become one of the nation's largest multi-year, multi-state systems focused on advancing performance-based evaluation. NIET reports that TAP initiatives affect more than 200,000 educators and 2.5 million students.²

How was the rubric developed?

Most K¹²-managed schools use state-mandated teacher evaluation rubrics designed for brick-and-mortar classrooms. Early on, both K12 Inc. and NIET recognized the need to develop an evaluation rubric applicable to the virtual learning environment, whether in a purely online or blended model.

To get a clear understanding of the practices specific to the virtual learning environment, NIET researchers observed many K¹² teachers at work. The researchers also held focus groups with teachers and followed up with discussions with school administrators.

In the early phases of the research, NIET representatives visited K¹² teachers in Arizona and Tennessee to observe them at work in their “classroom environment”—a term that takes on a new meaning for the online teacher who has no brick-and-mortar classroom and works with students at a distance rather than face to face. The researchers observed how teachers set up their workspace, how they organized

their school day, how they planned online lessons, and how they used technology, including a range of online tools for communication and tracking of student performance data.

A second phase of research involved observations and interviews with a group of teachers selected to ensure representation from across many different K¹²-managed schools, which vary in enrollment, grades served, student demographics, and instructional models. In February 2014, teachers from twenty K¹²-managed schools traveled to the offices of Texas Virtual Academy for two days of meetings. The researchers observed the teachers interacting with students during online instructional sessions, followed by focus groups with lively discussion of best practices and behaviors for online teachers.

The researchers paid special attention to teacher practices and behavior during synchronous sessions, in which teachers and students use an online platform to meet virtually in whole-class or group sessions. In a synchronous session, a teacher might work with students on, for example, strategies for solving word problems in mathematics. K¹²'s online platform offers tools that allow the teacher to divide students into groups. Teachers and students can write in an online whiteboard, and the teacher can deploy a quick online survey to elicit student responses. Speaking into microphones, teachers and students can hold conversations, while messaging tools allow for individualized written communications. Clearly, the adept and fluent use of these online tools would need to be seriously considered in developing a rubric for teacher effectiveness in the virtual classroom.

From the many observations, interviews, and focus group discussions, NIET worked with K¹² to develop a draft rubric that was then field-tested and revised.

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²<http://www.niet.org/our-impact/niet-impact-overview/>

What's in the K¹² Rubric?

The K¹² Rubric is organized into four domains:

1. PROFESSIONALISM: REFLECTING ON TEACHING
2. SYNCHRONOUS INSTRUCTION
3. PLANNING
4. ENVIRONMENT

The K¹² Rubric provides specific indicators of effective performance in each domain. For each indicator, a teacher may earn a score from 1 (Significantly Below Expectations) to 5 (Significantly Above Expectations). Some of the indicators apply to effective teaching practices in general, whether online or in a brick-and-mortar classroom, for example, “Teacher Content Knowledge” and “Instructional Plans.”

Other indicators focus on practices and behaviors specific to online teaching, for example, “Asynchronous Environment OLS [Online School] Alerts.” (See Figure 1.)

The K¹² Rubric is presented in the *K¹² Rubric Instructional Handbook*, which provides detailed explanations and examples for each of the indicators. The handbook serves as a guide for both teachers and leadership team members in implementing the K¹² teaching standards. The handbook gives teachers many descriptive scenarios of best practices in action. For administrators, school leaders, and instructional coaches, the handbook provides question prompts that can guide dialogue during post-observation feedback conversations.

FIGURE 1: A Sample from the K¹² Rubric

| K ¹² Asynchronous Environment—OLS Alerts | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 Significantly Below Expectations | 3 At Expectations | 5 Significantly Above Expectations |
| <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 15px; padding: 10px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> <p>Score</p> <p>.....</p> </div> <p>Performance definitions are provided at levels 5, 3, and 1. Raters can score performance at levels 2 or 4 based on their judgment.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher rarely manages OLS alerts by pulling from the student management tracker and demonstrating analysis of the information. - Teacher rarely uses alerts to inform student support actions, contact students and coaches, and inform team members. - Teacher rarely provides adequate notes in Total View of each point of contact related to the OLS alerts. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher sometimes manages OLS alerts by pulling from the students management tracker and demonstrating analysis of the information. - Teacher sometimes uses alerts to inform student support actions, contact students and coaches, and inform team members. - Teacher sometimes provides adequate notes in Total View of each point of contact related to the OLS alerts. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher consistently manages OLS alerts by pulling information from the student management tracker and demonstrating analysis of the information. - Teacher consistently uses alerts to inform student support actions, contact students and coaches, and inform team members. - Teacher consistently provides adequate notes in Total View of each point of contact related to OLS alerts. |

What do we hope to accomplish?

In working with NIET to develop a teacher evaluation rubric and handbook, our goal was to ground K¹² teacher effectiveness initiatives in a strong foundation based on research and experience, while at the same time breaking new ground by specifically focusing on online and blended learning environments. Our ongoing goal is to support K¹²-managed public schools and teachers by providing a shared vocabulary and frame of reference for what constitutes effective teaching in the online and blended learning environments in which we work.

Collaborating with NIET, K12 Inc. has produced the first teacher evaluation system designed specifically for online teachers in the kindergarten through grade 12 space. As such, it is a landmark for public education as more and more schools are beginning to incorporate online learning in every student's experience. Conscientiously implemented, the *K¹² Rubric Instructional Handbook* can help guide teachers to increasing levels of effectiveness—and, since effective teaching fosters effective learning, our efforts are, in the end, directed to the goal of improving student learning.