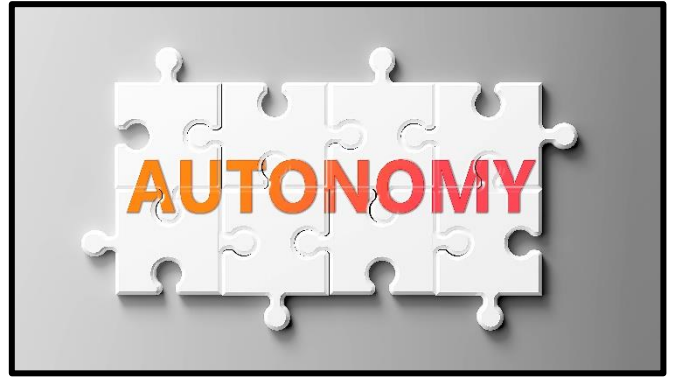


## Autonomy Comes with A Condition!

By Blaine Helwig

Several decades ago, I attended an August meeting with the associate superintendent of elementary schools in a large urban school district – 82 elementary schools with 60 of them classified as Title 1. The central topic of the meeting focused on Title 1 campus support for the upcoming school year. As a member of her staff, I was anxious to find out what elementary campuses I would be assigned to ‘support’ and ‘monitor.’ The associate superintendent assigned me the five lowest academically performing Title 1 elementary campuses in the district based on the previous spring’s standardized assessment results. Then, she added, “*The*

*campus principal of one of your five schools has requested greater autonomy this school year than last; however, I informed that principal that their school had not earned more autonomy due to their chronic academic performance.” It was at that moment that the elusive obvious of professional work reality struck me – **autonomy comes with a condition.***



Over my 40-year career in four professional fields, independent of industry, workplace autonomy is one of the most common employee ‘asks.’ Moreover, it is not an unreasonable demand, either. However, as we learn as professionals at some point in our career, our work-flow autonomy is invariably tagged with one condition: results. In most professions, the desire for job autonomy begins at mid-management levels, but in public education, autonomy is desired at every level in the organization regardless of associated performance.

Teachers want instructional autonomy and freedom in their classrooms, and a campus principal desires autonomy to manage their school as they see fit. Central office administrators choose the curriculum programming that directly impact the elementary campuses, but strangely, these same district administrators have no real accountability in their curricular programming decisions and curricular initiatives regardless of campuses’ academic performance. This leadership situation is a unique occurrence and provides them high levels of autonomy without associated accountability, and it is an aberration of the interdependency of both responsibility and authority required in any management capacity in this country. This peculiar and untenable management situation is examined in detail in the blog and white paper – entitled: **Responsibility and Authority: Public School Leadership.**



Thus, the only place in the public school system where autonomy, or the desire for autonomy, can come into play in any reasonable discussion is at the campus level. Moreover, the campus is the sole place where accountability directly regulates varying levels of principal and teacher autonomy.

***Autonomy must not be confused or equated with teaching styles.*** All campus educators in any role must be allowed to possess individual teaching or management styles – if they are respectful and effective. For instance, when I was a campus principal, there was a primary grade level with four teachers – and each classroom

teacher possessed differing teaching styles in their daily instruction, but all four teachers demonstrated efficacy in both social and academic outcomes. Thus, I did not re-engineer what was working. Their personalities dictated different instructional delivery modes that all arrived at the same end point. In demanding schoolwide conformity to a specific instructional delivery technique or teaching style, would notably diminish many teachers’ overall

instructional effectiveness with their children. For clarity, the question of work-flow autonomy is not related to individual teaching styles or classroom behavioral management, but rather it relates to the curricular resources employed to elevate student achievement.

### Evaluating Autonomy on an Elementary Campus – Teachers and Principals

The major question that needs to be addressed with regard to task completion in both our personal and professional lives is: *When should we change what we are doing?* The answer to that question is simple and straightforward. *It is time to change when what we are doing is not achieving desired or expected outcomes.*

In the case of schools, academic data must be the decision criteria and that data must be objective across the state. Consequently, the only data instrument that works is standardized testing. Of course, there will always be relevant issues with any type of assessment – especially with standardized testing; however, that assessment is objective since all children from all income levels are evaluated at the same time in all school settings across an entire State.

Moreover, standardized testing is highly grade level correlated. In fact, I know few administrators in the public school system that do not privately share that perspective. Conversely, there are a sizeable number of educators and education advocates that ignore standardized test data and its relevancy primarily because it does not support their arguments behind this country's chronic student achievement outcomes.



In my opinion, their arguments are self-defeating since standardized assessment data conveys a tremendous amount of information about differences between Title 1 and non-Title 1 schools, student processing knowledge and ability, as well as identifying Title 1 school outliers that demonstrate the ability to eliminate the infamous achievement gap with low-income students. It is important to note that inflexible campus educators, in response to change due to poor academic performance, frequently confuse their autonomy with increased accountability. In a word, standardized testing despite its many faults, is NOT the cause of poor student performance. It is a marked indicator that academic problems are prevalent in too many public schools.

#### *A Common Metric as an Indicator for Change*

If the use of standardized testing data is employed as a decision mechanism to evaluate the need for change, then the limits of performance need to be established. Thus, if 80 percent or more of the intermediate grade levels (i.e., 3<sup>rd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> grade) are meeting the State standard, then that school needs to only **target** a relatively small number of students to achieve an overall 90 percent (or greater) passing rate for all enrolled students (including children receiving special education services). That school should provide specific interventions to those students to rectify the literacy and numeracy academic skill gaps, as a beginning step. However, little needs to change at the school other than targeted intervention of select students. See the **New 3Rs Academic Transformation** to implement these interventions for **each** student. The process does not require a myriad of new money – just the opposite. The central focus of the campus principal is organizing the work in a way that addresses the academic need of the targeted students.

If the campus passing rate is below 80 percent, then there needs to be specific steps as mentioned in the previous paragraph; however, there are many more students that require intervention. Again, the elementary principal must

implement and monitor the academic intervention process. They alone are the key element to dramatic academic change since they are the only person that is authorized to employ school wide programming changes. If the principal does not know what steps to take, or they are not willing to change what is obviously not effective at the elementary campus, continued failure will persist for as long as they are allowed to remain the campus' 'instructional leader.'

The campus principal must recognize that the root cause of the problem is a numeracy and literacy skill gap, and although it takes work and effort, it is relatively easy to directly address this issue. Pressing this intervention work will accelerate the mass of students back to grade level while maintaining grade level learning. These processes are defined and presented at the [New 3Rs Academic Transformation](#) and are available for free download.

As the student passing percentages drop below 60 percent, then that Title 1 school is a metaphoric five alarm academic fire. There needs to be serious change at that point. These children are not performing poorly in school on an objective standardized assessment due to poverty, money, or the assessment itself that only indicates there is a local issue. Nope! That elementary school is NOT addressing students' academic needs, and the annual assessment is clearly indicating as much.

There is a mass of elementary schools in this country performing below 80 percent passing rates for math and literacy assessments. Oddly and unfortunately, when speaking to some of the principals and classroom teachers working at struggling academic schools, they demand continued autonomy to do exactly what has NOT been effective. These educators are unaware of the cost to their students by not implementing simple supplemental curricular resources that make a dramatic and positive change to turn the tide of poor student outcomes. Besides, educators' teaching styles and daily core lesson design remains under their complete control. What changes is the inclusion of small supplemental curricular resources that address the academic literacy and math skill gap for *each* student. This is the first prerequisite step in academic reform.

**What must change is that educators' VALUE their students' academic education and the long-term effect it has on their economic quality of living. Elementary educators' actions decide in real time their students' economic fate – good and bad – decades into the future.**

Another culture adjustment that must take place at the campus is for educators to VALUE *their students' academic education and the long-term effect it has on their economic quality of living*. There must be reflection and honesty, or real change will not occur. Specifically, it's relatively easy to determine what a person generally values in their personal and professional life by how they spend their *time, money and efforts*. If willful status quo failure is permitted to continue by school and district educators, then, that issue falls to the purview of the traditional or charter public school board members to address with the superintendent/founder.

### **The Real Cost of Allowing Continued Autonomy Without Performance**



Over the last three decades, the most lucrative professional work has been STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Math) related jobs. In May of 2023, the top forty (40) highest salaries for college undergraduate students were all STEM industries. As expected, the entry level requirements into those professions demand highly skilled college graduates in mathematics, science, technological skills, and computer science. However, all professional fields in today's labor force – STEM or not – require a high degree of those same skills to professionally succeed. Additionally, today's vocational workforce now requires many of those same core skill sets of varying levels to flourish in our technological society.



A solid and fundamental public education is the great equalizer. It allows middle to low-income children to move far beyond their families' money woes. One's academic education affords them the opportunity to live their adult years economically comfortably and beyond; unfortunately, the converse situation is equally as valid. It is public education years that lay the groundwork for success at university. I did not fully comprehend the empirical reality of the sentences in this paragraph until I was 25 years old.

Both my parents graduated high school without the common daily convenience of an indoor bathroom – only an outdoor privy. My father was the first person in his family to not only attend high school, but graduate. Consequently, they wanted better lives for their children, so my mother and father stressed the importance of education to their children. My parents' four children were conferred a cumulative total of 10 university degrees – six in civil engineering programs. However, it is important to note that they did not teach us the basics in math, science, reading and writing – our public-school teachers did.

In today's public schools, many children attend elementary schools that have standardized assessment failure rates as high as 80 percent of students – some more. These state mandated tests are deemed grade level since – first, they are vetted assessments, and second, the mass of children attending non-Title 1 schools pass these grade level tests with little to no difficulty. Of course, these are elementary children learning basic arithmetic – not mathematic topics like algebra, geometry, trigonometry, or calculus. Furthermore, it is officially reported 65% of fourth graders in this country do not read on or above grade level. When teachers and principals continue to ignore the fundamental academic numeracy and literacy gaps because those supplemental programs accelerate students to grade level impede their classroom autonomy, there is a larger issue at hand. Those teachers and the campus and central office administrators are doing a lifetime disservice to their children. Their inability to recognize they must change their behavior and processes for the benefit of their students' academic needs is the fundamental reason their students are not on grade level.

Far too many children today will not have the opportunity and economic advantages that my siblings and I had as career professionals. Thankfully, we had teachers and principals in our public-school years that knew what was at stake for their students – long-term. Alas, half a century has passed, and all the public-school educators of my youth are now retired or have passed away, but I am eternally grateful to them. Those educators understood the price of not allowing children to fall academically behind in school because they knew children do not miraculously 'catch-up' academically in later grades. They did not deceive themselves about the paramount importance of fundamental skills as far too many modern-day educators appear to do.



Simply put, the public school system is failing children and depriving them of their educational right, but those same educators defend their current and ineffective practices. These educators do not bear a personal financial cost – from classroom teachers to superintendents – since they continue to collect monthly paychecks and retirements regardless of student outcomes. Public school systems are local education agencies (LEAs), and in large part – highly independent of change outside the edicts of their own school boards. Therefore, in my opinion, **school board members are singularly to blame when their campuses do not academically improve school year after school year.** These Boards do NOT exercise their authority and hold superintendents or founders accountable, so they – in turn – can demand structural change and personnel accountability from subordinate central office and campus administrators.

In closing, today's educational philosophy that demands 'continued autonomy without performance' has a price – a price that will be paid by their students when they are adults and discover the lack of educational and financial opportunities available to them due to their deficient public-school education.