

17 Public Education Questions Requiring Candid Answers!

***Written for Legislators, Parents
and School Board Trustees –***

***Questions that both
educators and non-educators
should ask about the
public school system***

Blaine Helwig

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Executive Summary

Winston Churchill eloquently stated, *"The length of this document defends it well against the risk of ever being read."* Similarly, this 44-page document examining public education issues would normally require an interested educator or non-educator to possess unusual stamina; however, the paper is subdivided into 17 unique questions that focus on relevant issues in public education. Moreover, each question is independent of the other 16. Consequently, the interested reader can pick and choose which questions interest them and read only those selected sections.

In 1953, John Foster Dulles, the United States Secretary of State under Dwight Eisenhower, made the following observation regarding the lack of significant progress with the same issue over time, *"The measure of success is not whether you have a tough problem to deal with, but whether it is the same problem you had last year."* Dulles' statement precisely describes not only the academic reformation of Title 1 campuses in this country, but also the lack of improvement in many other areas of public education after increasing funding! In short, Title 1 campuses or low-income schools produce the same low levels of academic performance school year after school year despite billions of taxpayer dollars expended across the educational spectrum.

Student outcomes had NOT appreciably improved before the COVID pandemic. However, after the pandemic, the performance of low-income schools significantly declined. Many Title I elementary campuses—where students had been performing slightly above grade level prior to the lockdown—saw a marked drop, with a large number of children falling below grade level in the aftermath. That new cluster of children not only joined the large pre-pandemic group of failing low-income students, but they did not regain their academic footing over time – despite the tremendous influx of state and federal ESSER funding allocations to the public-school districts since 2020. To the education outsider, this situation must appear bewildering. However, to veteran insiders, it is not a mystery at all. The funds were legally spent – under the local control and authority of school and district administrators – but funds were spent in line with the John Foster Dulles' principle of stagnated improvement as had financial allocations prior to the pandemic. Hence, the lack of evidence of dramatic academic improvement after COVID did not surprise any veteran educator highly familiar with the internal workings of the public school system.

This white paper examines the primary issues of the lack of problem-solving initiatives to significantly improve overall student performance as well as the continued ineffective school practices and management authority granted to independent school districts. One primary reason state legislators do not press school board trustees for greater accountability of their one employee (the superintendent or charter founder) is the historical legacy of local school control. In short, local governance is the rule of law in the public education system. Consequently, when school board trustees do not hold their one employee accountable for academic improvement and ineffective/inefficient practices, then all district and school administrators under the superintendent are not held accountable. The seventeen (17) questions presented in this document are the type of critical questions that school board trustees, state legislators and concerned taxpayers should possess more background information.

School districts are complicated places, and it is easy to become lost in the noise and motion of so many moving parts – which is a major reason why non-educators do not comprehend these central issues. However, this document aims to provide insight into several seemingly complex topics – including increases in educator pay, the science of reading, the fundamentals of artificial intelligence, and the potential impact of AI on public education. My responses to these 17 questions are derived from my three decades of experience working in traditional and charter public schools as a classroom teacher, campus principal, or a central office administrator.

Some educators may take umbrage to my responses to the questions, as has occurred in past papers and blogs I have written. It is never my intention to insult or embarrass my administrative colleagues. My only aim when I write on educational equity issues is to question the absurdity of performance outcomes of low-income children that remain incessantly lower than their more affluent peers – despite massive annual funding allocations. It is important to note that low-income schools can be dramatically improved for all students; however, the last five decades has clearly indicated the current operating structure of the public school system opposes change regardless of their results. In my opinion, it is time for legislators to assume a more active role in the oversight capacity of all school systems – possibly through their education agency and its commissioner. It is my hope that this document provides state politicians at the capitol with a deeper understanding of pertinent school system practices, and that they press forward with changes that benefit taxpayers and the educational outcomes of low-income children's education.

About the Author

Blaine Helwig is a locally, state and nationally recognized campus administrator and was the J. Walter Graham Elementary Principal in Austin ISD for 9 years. In that time period, J. Walter Graham Elementary (an urban Title 1 school) experienced dramatic and sustained academic success with typical inner city challenging student demographics. From 2009 to 2016, Graham Elementary School's academic performance earned exemplary accountability ratings and every possible academic distinction by the Texas Education Agency. The school was honored as a 2012 National Blue Ribbon School recipient, and the campus was featured as a National Blue Ribbon Profile School for academic excellence on the United States Department of Education's website - one of only four schools in the country to receive this prestigious honor. The Graham campus has also been recognized annually by Education Non-Profit Organizations for high and sustained academic performance. Finally, the language arts, mathematics and science stop-gap resources implemented at Graham that produced heightened student success are currently used in many other Title 1 campuses and districts with similar high percentages of English Language Learners, minority and low socioeconomic student populations.



After completing a Bachelor of Science degree in Architectural Engineering from the University of Texas at Austin in 1985, he began his professional career as a lead structural engineer designing over 100 state and federal highway bridges in Texas. He also worked as a senior project engineer for the Department of Defense with technical engineering management and oversight on the Parrotts Ferry signature bridge retrofit in California as well as environmental site mitigation at Little Dell Dam in Utah and a hydraulic conduit drainage redesign at Lake Sonoma Dam in California. At present, Mr. Helwig retains his license as a registered professional engineer in Texas with a structural engineering specialization.

In 1992, Mr. Helwig was conferred a Bachelor of Business Administration in Accounting. During this period of business study at the University of Texas, he pursued additional and focused coursework in both economics and finance. Mr. Helwig is extremely appreciative of the financial support from the US military throughout his years of university education and is a proud veteran of both the United States Air Force and Army.

After working as an accounting director for a large library system in central Texas, he was alternatively certified to work as an elementary teacher by the University of Texas. He taught fourth and fifth grade self-contained classrooms in the Round Rock Independent School District for six years. It was during those professional years that extensive language arts, science, social studies and mathematics curriculum were developed. The initial design work on the numeracy and literacy stop-gap resources was completed, implemented and beta-tested in intermediate classrooms. Those stop-gap intervention programs significantly evolved during his Title 1 school experience and are currently used by tens of thousands of elementary students in both traditional public schools as well as charter schools across the State of Texas.

In 2004, he was awarded a master's degree in educational administration from Texas State University and worked for two years as the assistant principal at Charlotte Cox Elementary in the Leander Independent School District, a suburban school district near Austin. He began work in the Austin Independent School District in 2006 as an Elementary Program Supervisor under the direction of the Associate Superintendent's Office. A year later, he started his principal assignment at J. Walter Graham Elementary and maintained that capacity until his retirement in the fall of 2016. In 2012, Mr. Helwig was recognized by the United States Department of Education as one of seven recipients in the country with the prestigious Terrel H. Bell award for school transformation for producing outstanding student achievement for all students regardless of race, language proficiency and socioeconomic status. He was also the 2012 recipient of the Central Texas HEB Principal Excellence in Education Award and a five-time nominee and a two-time finalist for Austin ISD Principal of the Year. Currently, Blaine Helwig is a curriculum writer and a Title 1 education consultant in rural and urban school transformation. He is a cofounder of Celestial Numeracy, a daily numeracy program that presently serves over 80,000 elementary and middle students each day as well as a cofounder of The New 3Rs Education Consulting.

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By Blaine Helwig

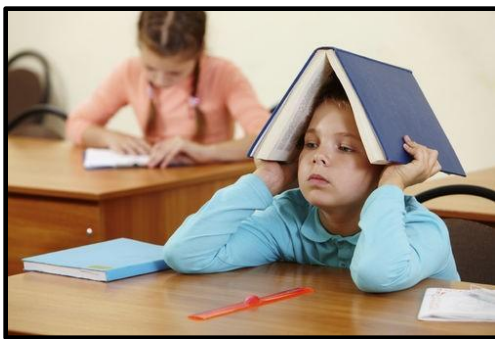
Over the last 3 decades, my passion has been analyzing the causes of educational inequity as well as dramatically heightening the academics of low-income, Title 1 schools. These campuses comprise approximately 60 percent of the total number of public schools in the United States.

Based on my professional engineering and accounting/finance work experience *outside* the school system, as well as the accomplished success of my professional track record and work *within* the public schools, I am confidently knowledgeable in most aspects of the workings of the public education system.



Since I live in Austin, I watch the Texas House and Senate Education Committees when the Legislature is in session – sometimes in person but mostly via the internet. Similarly, I also watch the local school board meetings on their designated access cable TV channel. But I frequently become very frustrated with these real time broadcasts. As I sit in my living room, I find myself literally talking out loud to my television set or i-phone, I am usually saying, ***“That is not the right question to ask!”*** Or I comment, ***“Why are you listening to someone that has never had success in academic reform – not once in their career at a low-income school?”*** I occasionally call out to my wife who is in the other room, and rhetorically say, ***“Where is the accountability (i.e., program evaluation) of expected student outcomes with that curriculum initiative or legislation?”***

In response to questions that legislators and school board members **do not know whether to ask or do not want to ask**, I am posing and answering seventeen salient public education queries. These questions and the related discussions drill down to the campus level – the area that is paramount to improving students’ social and academic outcomes. The responses also provide background information and the perspective of a seasoned teacher and veteran campus and district administrator. That point of view in and of itself allows the interested non-educator to gain a better understanding of the public education system and its weak points that indirectly, and directly, affect the educational quality of American children.



Of course, it is imperative that the reader fully understand that a student’s academic prowess directly influences a child’s self-esteem and social awareness. Academic ability and self-esteem are closely dependent on one another. ***Why?*** If a student is **not** doing well academically in school, it frequently and negatively influences their social awareness not only with their classmates, but it negatively impacts their self-esteem as well. Students’ self-realization of their academic understanding generally begins when they are in the third grade and become cognizant that they do **not** understand the content during daily grade level reading, writing, and math lessons.

The psychological result of academic unpreparedness: In my educational experience as both a classroom teacher and campus administrator, children are usually quiet when they do not understand grade level content. They try not to draw attention to themselves as they quietly acquiesce to the

reality that they do not understand the academic content in their elementary classrooms. On the other hand, some children act out and become behavioral challenges due to personal embarrassment, often attempting to divert attention away from their lack of understanding of the current classroom activities. These students may feel bored or disengaged because they struggle to participate meaningfully in the lessons. As a result, they resort to disruptive behavior, which not only hinders their own learning but also negatively impacts the learning environment for their peers. In fact, sadly, a considerable number of these affected students will (likely) drop out of school before or after they enter their high school years. In the long run, if academic struggling students are not pressed back to grade level, their poor academic prowess negatively affects their economic opportunities later in life.

Note: When a child is disruptive in class, one of the first things a knowledgeable administrator investigates is the student's academic ability. If a child is struggling academically, the campus administrator knows immediately to begin literacy/numeracy interventions with the student. They must implement a parallel course of academic intervention and behavioral monitoring checks throughout the day to curb the negative behavior. Then, once the child is academically caught up, their disruptive behavior is invariably extinguished. If the child is not struggling with grade level content, it is a much easier fix from a time perspective. A student who presents both academic and behavioral challenges often demands a significant amount of attention from both the teacher and school administrators. Nevertheless, it is essential that the classroom teacher receives consistent support from the principal to ensure high-quality instruction continues for the rest of the class.

Let's begin...

So, why do so many low-income students remain academically behind 3 or 4 (plus) years after enrolling in kindergarten or prekindergarten? Let's answer this question by posing a series of questions that state legislators, as well as school board members, should know. Then, I will provide key background information in my responses to help them question superintendents and administrators about improving achievement in Title I elementary schools. This writing is lengthy; however, an educational enthusiast can pick and choose which questions are of relevance to them. Thus, the interested reader can focus only on those areas to (hopefully) gain a better understanding of that distinct part of the public school system.

For reasons of definitional clarity, when I use the term, **academic turnaround**, I specifically mean that a Title 1 elementary campus achieves the same academic results as non-Title 1 schools. And there is not a performance or achievement gap between low and high socioeconomic elementary (or middle school) campuses in a school district – despite vastly different household incomes at each school.

Question 1: – Will increasing the annual salary for teachers result in significantly higher academic results in Title 1 schools?

If increasing classroom teacher pay is needed for educators to maintain a standard cost-of-living where they are geographically employed, then their annual salary needs to be raised immediately. Teachers do not take a vow of poverty to serve students. They must be adequately compensated, so that their salary clearly demonstrates the value of their work. Now, having qualified my response, let us continue to discuss the realities of our first question.

I believe every teacher's annual salary in the State of Texas could be doubled or tripled, and I am thoroughly convinced that there would not be an appreciable rise in student achievement. It is immaterial whether added funds are intended for an incentive/performance pay proposition or for additional money to increase a teacher's



annual compensation. Empirically, it is highly unlikely that increased funding alone will lead to significant gains in student achievement. *Why?* That action implies that teachers are not working hard, but after they are better compensated, they will teach their students with more diligence and effectiveness. **The vast majority of classroom teachers are already working hard and giving them more money cannot make them work harder.** Educators cannot do more of the same, only ‘harder,’ and expect student achievement to suddenly improve. Fundamentally and in the short term, paying teachers across the country more money and

anticipating higher academic performance is an unrealistic expectation. In the long term, from an economic principle of supply and demand, higher annual public education salaries will have an inherent tendency to attract higher quality university students to classroom teaching. Those individuals may possess more analytical or intellectual ability. Consequently, in the long-run, better teaching candidates will assist in the academic turnaround of Title 1 campuses **when** the campus administration has the knowledge to oversee and champion the systematic intervention processes that matter.

Of course, in the short-term, if higher student outcomes are desired, teachers and campus administrators must change what they are currently doing in the classroom, or (again) their performance will remain roughly the same as in previous school years – as has been proven repeatedly over the last six decades. School educators need a different pedagogical and curricular programming approach to address the rudimentary academic needs of children attending Title 1 low-income schools. It is a logical and systematic approach that will drive higher performance outcomes, but the required changes are three-fold. **First**, teachers must improve their pedagogical effectiveness via a spaced repetition system, so all students master the content. This pedagogical methodology will eradicate the current instruction model of, *“Teach it. The students got it, OR they did not. Teacher moves on regardless!”* Employing spaced repetition instruction, a dynamic daily spiraling pedagogical technique that directly engages children allows the classroom teacher to provide a series of short mini lessons quickly each day prior to the core lesson until the threshold repetitions are met for content mastery for all students. **Second**, educators must implement curricular resources (both Tier 1 and supplemental) that provide sufficient practice and threshold repetition mastery of the daily content. **Lastly**, a schoolwide supplemental stopgap curricular system must be implemented to directly address students’ academic literacy and numeracy gaps ensuring *dependent and prior* grade level skills are mastered – preparing students for grade level Tier 1 curriculum.



I have written extensively on academic reformation of low-income schools, and those white papers, documents, and curricular resources are available (free downloads) on **The New 3Rs** – the website address provided in the footer of this document. These measures and resources will dramatically increase literacy and mathematics achievement at low-income Title 1 campuses as well as for any academically struggling children enrolled in medium and high socioeconomic elementary schools. However, in the case of the latter, more affluent children’s parents possess financial resources to pay for commercial tutoring services. Those commercial vendors will isolate and academically rectify the content issues for their students, or parents will not continue to pay for the expensive, individualized services. The difference is that those small group and individual interventions will not be effective in a large Title 1 elementary school with

student enrollments between 500 and 1,300 students. A systematic schoolwide programming process is required to rectify prior academic grade level gaps for all enrolled students.

Question 2: – Are teachers the most important hire on an elementary campus?

I have heard this query frequently over the years. In **non-Title 1** elementary schools, it is one-hundred percent accurate to emphatically state, “*Teachers are the most important hire on an elementary campus!*” However, on a Title 1 (low-income) campus, it is a different academic environment. A Title 1 campus is **not** on autopilot for academics as is a medium to high socioeconomic school. At low-income campuses, most children enroll at school academically behind grade-level. Of course, non-Title 1 campuses do possess difficult issues, too – just not student academics. For instance, to effectively manage demanding parents, a specific diplomatic, administrative skill set is required. If the administration is not politically adept at handling these challenging issues, they will not have a long tenure at a middle-to-high socioeconomic school.



In comparison to a medium and high socioeconomic (non-Title 1) campus, **the Title 1 campus principal is the most important hire.** A low-income campus will invariably require implementing global academic systems that rapidly address the academic literacy and numeracy gaps to equal the performance outcomes of their more affluent campus counterparts – usually on the other side of town. At Title 1 campuses, the principal establishes the instructional philosophy, classroom support levels for student behavior, stopgap supplemental academic programming, grade level curricular Tier 1 programming, instructional specialists’ daily duties, pedagogical leadership, and they also hire teachers.

It is highly unlikely to expect that an entire faculty will band together, independent of the principal, and develop vertical and horizontal systems of supplemental curricular programming to address students’ academic and social needs. Strong leadership—specifically from the campus instructional leader—is essential for this kind of academic reform to take root. If the elementary principal doesn’t lead the effort and clearly prioritize what matters, the school’s academic performance will remain low and stagnant.

Question 3: – Do graduate degrees in educational administration translate to more knowledge and expertise in the academic turnaround of low-income schools?

This question is very specific to the academic turnaround of Title 1 schools. Answering this question demands not only a pragmatic response but a truthful one. In general, a person is always learning when they are engaged in an activity, and graduate school coursework in educational administration is not an exception to this thinking. Thus, I would like to respond in a structured manner. **First**, completing graduate school coursework to complete either a master’s or doctorate degree in educational administration is not difficult. It is a matter of putting in the effort and turning in compulsory assignments on time. It does not require the same cognitive effort as my undergraduate degree in civil engineering. That course load and rigorous content in both mathematics and physics was challenging for all my classmates. In completing a four-year engineering degree, the examinations in every course are mentally tough – semester in and semester out.



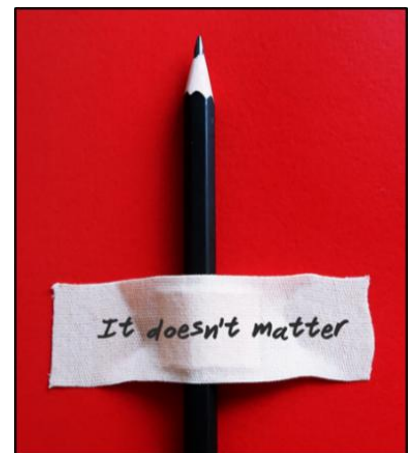
On the other hand, in the College of Education graduate school, there were not many examinations over course content; in fact, after the first semester, I did not purchase the textbooks for most of the courses. Graduate classes were mostly lectures and student presentations based on the particulars of the course. However, the individual and group presentations were very valuable exercises in preparation and practice of bettering one's public speaking ability. That skill set is exceedingly useful in the administration duties of any public school or central office capacity.



But to address the question posed above, there is little to no knowledge gained in Title 1 academic reformation in either undergraduate or graduate school at any university in the United States – from the local community school to an Ivy League college. I attended graduate school in educational administration more than two decades ago, and I made a 4.0 grade point average. After graduating, I had no understanding of how to begin improving a struggling Title I elementary school—academically or systematically. Interestingly, none of my undergraduate or graduate professors had demonstrated any success in academic turnaround during their years as campus and district administrators. Not surprisingly, as the aphorism attributed to Galileo Galilei accurately states, *one cannot teach what they do not know*. In summary, there were not any academic measures or specific global system strategies discussed in any detail on academic reformation of low-income campuses during my two years in graduate school. My professors all taught at a 40-thousand-foot superficial overview on that topic.

However, it is possible that my university graduate experience was an outlier, and that other graduate programs taught methodology in significantly improving student performance. So, let's evaluate the general professional performance of current and retired College of Education graduate degree holders, so a non-educator can view the situation from an overarching perspective over time. In essence, graduate curriculum and administration degrees can be specifically isolated for the professional expertise and knowledge acquired for heightening student outcomes. As previously mentioned, Title 1 public schools have not significantly improved academically over the last six decades anywhere in the country except in isolated situations, and those occurrences are and were conveniently ignored or discredited.

Consequently, there has **not** been a general, significant improvement in the academic performance of low-income schools in at least the last 60 to 70 years. Thus, it does not seem to matter which university a school or district administrator attends graduate study since it does not impact student learning in low-income schools – regardless of the prestige of the university. An aspiring administrator can graduate with a master's or doctorate degree from an Ivy League school like Harvard or obtain an advanced degree from a fully certified state university. Or they can also attend and acquire an accredited certificate from the local community college in educational administration. Once again, academic reform expertise seems to make little difference, as low-income schools have shown little to no improvement over the past six decades. All graduates obviously left their education programs like I did – clueless on the necessary and required steps to better the academics at a Title 1 public school.



In my professional public education career spanning more than three decades, I can count on one hand the number of educators I have personally met who had any pragmatic understanding of bettering student achievement in the public school system – traditional or charter schools. A Title 1 principal's student outcomes transparently speak for themselves when measuring one's level of academic success with low-income children.

secondary public feeder schools are largely unable to solve the literacy challenges of students one to three grade levels behind that transitioned from their own elementary schools' reading language arts classrooms.

Since learning two languages is a valuable skill, there are alternative solutions to the failing dual language and late exit bilingual programs. Since many low-income schools have a high population percentage of English Language Learners (i.e., ELs or ELLs ~ Bilingually Emergent), they can offer enrichment native language sessions in an afterschool program. Or the school can elect to extend the elementary school day to afford more language instructional time for ELs to learn two academic languages to mastery.



The fact that bilingual programs are implemented with fidelity in low-income public schools and consistently achieve subpar student outcomes is due to political and cultural pressures from educators and advocates. The loss of students' literacy ability is apparently less important to many educators than the political and cultural rationale of bilingual programming in Title 1 schools. However, in the long run, it is the children of poverty that eventually pay the price for these language acquisition programs due to the self-interest of educators' careers and philosophical beliefs. In the end, they ultimately promote what is good for their professional careers, but not for low-income

children. Basically, these educators favor their curriculum of belief over the curriculum of reality.

It is important to note that for non-native English speakers in the United States that possess a home language of Spanish, there are definite advantages of accelerating English instruction during the school day. Since students possess basic listening and speaking skills albeit likely of a non-standard academic Spanish language, enrichment language sessions afterschool are very effective for several reasons. **First**, those students can process the most basic elements of listening and speaking aspects of the language, and it is easier to learn to read and write with those two-beginning language acquisition skill sets intact. **Second**, the Spanish language is wholly phonetic unlike the English language – where professional linguists estimate that 25 percent of English words do not follow a basic spelling pattern. However, the syllabic aspect of the Spanish language allows students to correctly spell and pronounce almost any word in that language solely based on specific letter sounds. Similarly, the writing skill set is also an easier skill to teach in Spanish than English. **Finally**, when students are in middle school, they can enroll in a foreign language elective. Native Spanish speakers would possess a formidable language base to formalize their academic and standard Spanish literacy skills at that point. And, of course, students are on grade level in English reading and writing skills.

Question 5: – What is the main objective of an elementary principal on a Title 1 campus?



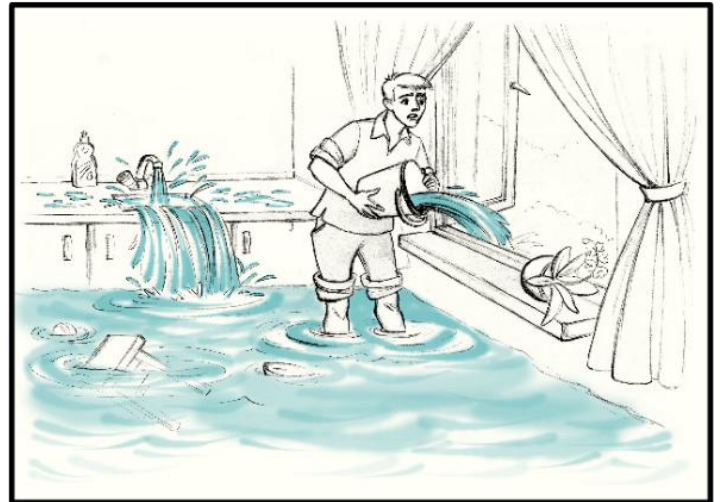
The main priority and focus of an elementary Title 1 principal **must** be to heighten the academic performance of their students. The primary issue is that this singular objective rarely occurs during their leadership tenure at the campus. Almost all Title 1 elementary school's academic performance across the country remains relatively flat – and the percentage of students on grade level in the intermediate grades (i.e., 3rd – 5th grades) in core subjects of math, reading/writing and science can be as low as 10 to 20 percent meeting standards to a high of around 70 percent. That is the general academic performance range (e.g., 10 to 70

percent) of low-income students meeting standards in most low-income schools in the United States.

Another ineffective leadership process is when campus and district administrators recycle a curricular initiative(s) that was ineffective from a decade past; however, it is reimplemented anyway usually under a new name or facade. This curricular merry-go-round sequel occurs so often that highly seasoned classroom teachers are rarely taken back to see a regurgitated curricular program reappear. Not surprisingly, there is not any program evaluation associated with a new curricular initiative – new or regurgitated. Consequently, no administrator accountability exists in either the short or long term when the new initiative does not produce a concrete change in student performance.

Many **entry-level** principals of low-income schools with two to three years of experience make external excuses for their campus' lack of performance, or they reference educational 'pundits' that state it takes 4 to 5 years to academically turn around a challenging Title 1 elementary school. I can attest from professional experience that it only requires a year to two years to completely academically turn around a low-income campus in both mathematics and literacy, if the correct steps are taken and implemented with consistency and fidelity. However, since there is little to no accountability at any level in administration at the campus or district level, ineffective leaders remain at the helm with no tangible increases in student results for many school years. Principal supervisors or superintendents rarely ask a Title 1 campus principal the simple question, "*What is your academic objective at your campus?*" Quite probably, district administrators do not ask campus Title 1 principals that query or follow-up questions on stagnant academic performance for successive years, because they do not know the systematic process for raising student outcomes, either. The one interesting psychological element that I have always found amazing is that administrators at all levels in the school system rarely reflect on their own leadership and stagnant student performance, and then contemplate, "Is it me?"

It has been my professional experience as a district administrator or consultant that most **veteran** elementary Title 1 principals do not publicly and specifically state their academic goal of significantly improving student outcomes since they have been at the campus for multiple years and academics have remained persistently flat. Their leadership tenures are invariably marked by repeated years of, '*Doing the same thing all over again – with the same level but depressed outcomes.*' Since administrators exit their master's and doctoral graduate programs with little to no understanding of academic reformation, the campus leadership model in low-income schools evolves into one of physical plant maintenance. Unfortunately, almost all Title 1 elementary schools are operated by what I term, a physical plant manager/principal. These administrators keep the building lights on and the water running – kids come and go each day – and academics are incessantly stable, but depressed. There are ample meetings and professional development sessions during the school year, but it is basically a repeat of the prior year throughout the administrator's tenure. In short, the dogmatic instructional and curricular systems of the physical plant administrator do not directly affect the actual achievement problem of the academic numeracy and literacy gaps – the root cause of the achievement gap. Those two issues must be systematically addressed.



Finally, the lack of academic performance frequently results in high levels of teacher attrition at the mass of low-income schools. One of the main reasons teachers leave underperforming Title I schools—and the profession altogether—is the lack of results after investing years of time and energy. As is widely known in

the profession, Title 1 teacher attrition is higher because it is more work than a non-Title 1 public school for the same salary. But overall, it is the lack of results after consuming tremendous energy and time for multiple school years when student outcomes do not improve from one year to the next. If there is one critical ‘thing’ that drives educators to leave a chronically low performing school, it is that they do not view their work as productive and successful. Alas, the ineffective administration remains as students continue **not** to master elementary school reading, math, and science at grade level proficiency standards. *The end effect?* Classroom teachers quit and go anywhere else that presents a better option of meaningful or purposeful outcomes in their daily work, whether it is in the education field or outside it.

Question 6: – Will the Science of Reading (SOR) dramatically raise literacy performance?



This question is important to answer since the Science of Reading (SOR) is the **correct** English Language Arts (ELA) methodology for primary grade language acquisition. Specifically, the SOR emphasizes the following literacy components: phonics, phonemic awareness, reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary development. It is critical to understand that phonics provides beginning readers with a **GENERAL** method of decoding unfamiliar words in print – which is a systematic approach and important due to the typical varying levels of young readers’ cognitive processing ability. Unfortunately, the Science of

Reading as a standalone Tier 1 program will not appreciably lift student outcomes in Title 1 elementary schools to the level of their medium and high socioeconomic counterparts. Teachers that implement the SOR with fidelity will press literacy rates marginally higher; however, low-income children’s academic literacy word (fluency) gaps **MUST** be directly addressed. *Why?* In reality, children of poverty are in academic catch-up mode the minute they enroll in prekindergarten/kindergarten.

The fundamental SOR literacy challenge cannot be a *standalone* Tier 1 curricular resource in the effective academic turnaround of low-income elementary schools for three reasons. **First**, low-income children arrive at school linguistically behind their more affluent peers attending non-Title 1 schools – significantly behind. Simply thinking that students will academically catch up by using a Tier 1 curricular resource is not realistic when analytically comprehending the linguistic barrier that children of poverty are facing. There must be additional instructional methodologies and resources implemented to complement the SOR methodology.

Second, a supplemental stopgap 1,000-word fluency program must be implemented to rapidly increase children in the primary grades word fluency. In my professional experience as an administrator and a consultant, the reading fluency words per minute (WPM) rate at year’s end in most Title 1 first grade ELA classrooms are approximately half the rate or 55 to 60 WPM than they should be. Consequently,



when many low-income children read, they process text so slowly that they are unable to comprehend the meaning of the sentence that they just finished reading. In effect, their cognitive CPU’s processing power is depleted due to a lack of word fluency – reading processing speed. Additionally, the English language has slowly evolved over the last seven hundred (700) years to embody a modern-day monstrosity of basic English word spellings. Thus, a second supplemental curricular resource is a stopgap 800-word non-negotiable word

program that also must be implemented beginning in first grade. **Third**, SOR and the two (free) supplemental stopgap literacy programs must be **applied** in classroom reading ELA environments – GNI – Guided Novel Instruction. This ensures there is more than adequate reading practice each day in the language arts classroom as English instruction is accelerated for children of poverty. **Finally**, there must also be an accountable independent reading program to ensure children are reading at home. With the use of these literacy programs, students are rapidly accelerated back to grade level English literacy. In short, these supplemental stopgap programs help counter the challenges of language acquisition for the vast majority of low-income students. A free downloadable literacy framework lays out in detail all the additional resources, SOR, stopgap supplementals, and instructional elements. That document is provided on the website listed in the footer of this document.

My pedagogical fear is that school district personnel will abandon the SOR methodology when they discover it is not the magic bullet solution and change/revert to their whole language instructional approach in their ELA classrooms. The whole language instructional model has empirically proven to be a step in the backward direction, and it should not have a rebirth in the public schools and repeat the literacy disaster from the 1980's to the first two decades of the new millennium.



It is important to stress to the non-educator that there is **not** sufficient time to teach two languages to mastery in elementary school for the mass of low-income children who are academically behind in both their native tongue and English with the current and typical elementary school day schedule that begins at 7:45 AM and ends at 3:00 PM. However, if the standard school day is lengthened by another hour a day to 4:00 PM, then that additional time would allow the dynamics to change and make dual language and bilingual programs in general to be much more effective.

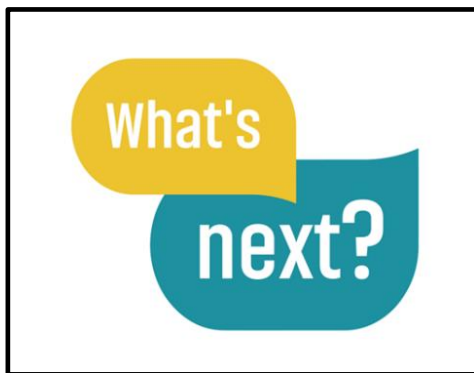
As mentioned in Question 4 above, non-native English speakers can also participate in an afterschool native language enrichment program. District and campus administrators must meet children where they are instructionally, and not where they wish they were in accordance with the adopted Tier 1 grade level curriculum. This mistake is made repeatedly in Title 1 public schools, and children are overwhelmed and discouraged. In effect, low-income children must be pressed academically back to grade level, so all Tier 1 curriculum works as it is designed. Interestingly, there is little debate that low-income students begin school with academic literacy gaps. However, administrators continue to deploy Tier 1 curriculum that assumes that they do not have prior grade level or academic skill gaps. It is incomprehensible, and I cannot explain it after approximately 30 years in the field.

The English language has evolved dramatically in word spelling and word borrowings from its Germanic origin over 1500 years ago. Latin and the many Indo-European language (e.g., French, Spanish, Greek, Russian, Celtic, Italian, etc.) word borrowings have created a myriad of non-phonetic word spelling anomalies over the last millennium as well as the dramatic effect of the Great Vowel Shift between the 14th and 16th centuries in southern England, that heavily influenced basic word spellings of all English language dialects. It is for these reasons among others that English is relatively difficult for low-income students to master especially when they enter their elementary years significantly behind in academics, comparatively speaking. Those language (word/fluency) gaps must be systematically addressed during the elementary years – specifically in the primary grade levels, or the poor literacy results will continue to occur across the country. In Title 1 schools, the administration must grasp the importance of establishing and consistently pressing these global stopgap supplemental academic systems, or dramatic heightening of student outcomes will not occur.

In terms of pressing social and academic performance, (again) Title 1 principals must meet children at the level where they are – not where your Tier 1 curriculum says they should be. Academic literacy gaps must be addressed systematically for all students. Fortunately, the stopgap supplemental curricular programs are individualized, so rectifying those issues via a simple and global system is a structured process – and the system is easy to monitor. Otherwise, student outcomes will remain exactly as they are today – chronically low.

In closing, the supplemental stopgap programs (800 and 1,000 word) are free downloads as is the literacy framework, so there is no additional cost to the campus, teacher, or taxpayer. The process is so simple and general that it is easy to replicate at any Title 1 school with a typical educator faculty. Success comes with consistent implementation and individually targeting each child, so no child is left educationally behind.

Question 7: – Why do the new academic curricular initiatives implemented at the start of the school year incessantly fail to raise student outcomes?



In response to continued low student outcomes in every core content area, central office administrators propose a ‘*new ivory tower*’ curricular program (or a regurgitated program from the past) to increase student performance every few years to replace the series of other literacy, science and math programs from previous years that were ineffective. It is a rite of passage in almost every school district in the country if one works in the public education industry for at least a decade. The first reason that this curricular and instructional process occurs almost every year to some degree in school districts with multiple low-income Title 1 schools is two-fold. **First**, academic

performance has not improved, or it has declined from the previous school year at district Title 1 campuses. **Second**, district administrators must propose ‘something’ to the school board members to justify not only their jobs but also to convey the impression to the trustees that they possess a plan to address the failure issue. However, a mainstay in these initiatives is that there is little to *no program evaluation* with these curricular or pedagogical proposals. School board trustees rarely, if ever, ask or question the proposal for specifics. They readily accept it with few questions about when and what results will be produced as well as the professional accountability associated with the curricular initiative.

Consequently, let’s address Question 8 above: Why does this central office curricular ‘charade’ continue despite the lack of academic results. There are two sides to this process – the school board and the district administration. Let’s examine both. **One**, the district administrator is presenting and offering a solution to the problem of chronic student achievement. However, *the primary issue is that they have never isolated the problem that they are actually trying to solve.* The district administrator is for all practical purposes, throwing darts blindly and hoping they hit something.’ If they knew the root cause of the problem that they were attempting to solve, then some



school district would have solved it sometime over the last half-century. Besides, most central office administrators have been in the public education system for decades by that point. Many times, they are buying time, so that they can vest their retirement and leave their ‘unsolvable’ student achievement issue to someone else. **Two**, the school board trustees are mostly volunteers with a limited knowledge of the workings of a large school district with over a billion-dollar operating budget. There are thousands of moving parts that to the

outsider, it is nearly impossible to know what questions to ask. Moreover, even if there is a trustee who understands the repeated weaknesses in these district presentations, they are in a difficult position. Does the trustee(s) ask questions that the administrator cannot answer and publicly embarrass them? Those questions are straightforward and common sense, and they must focus on accountability, rationale, performance and timelines. These follow-up questions are not asked by board members either out of ignorance, or they do not want to embarrass the superintendent and his/her administrator subordinates.

Finally, school board members may be reluctant to ask probing questions of their one employee, the superintendent, and his or her curricular programs if, one – they aspire to higher political office in government, and they do not want to chance backlash that adversely affects that endeavor. Or – school board members have taken campaign contributions from teacher and administration unions, and those organizations do **not** want those questions asked in public for accountability and transparency reasons.

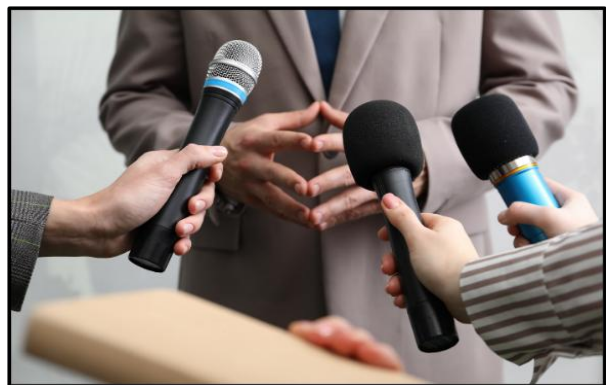
Question 8: – Why are newspaper reporters who cover public education as well as state and federal legislators not effective in investigating the causes of persistent academic underperformance?



The issue that state and federal legislators face is difficult because it always depends on where they get their information on public school issues. They receive most of their information from ‘experts’ in the field that have never personally worked in the school systems, and if they have, they have never had any professional success in the school reformation area. Incidentally, this is the same issue with graduate school classes in educational administration. The college professors teaching those courses do not possess the successful experience in academic reformation, either. Quite frankly, one cannot teach what one has not personally mastered.

Coincidentally, legislators at both state and federal levels rely on the same type of self-proclaimed expert, so they get confusing, distracting and conflicting information. Honestly, at some point in their legislative term, it must be difficult for lawmakers to comprehend how and why so many Title 1 schools cannot be academically improving. It is the same as with good intentioned school board trustee volunteers. There are so many moving parts in a school system, and so many agendas and noise that it is easy to get lost and confused in the answers. This general situation is more than apparent to a knowledgeable educator watching either a senate or house congressional committee meeting. The legislator (again, like a school board trustee) does not know the follow-up questions to ask a high-ranking administrator, educational advocate or concerned citizen who is presenting before their committee.

Newspaper reporters have the same lack of background knowledge on how a large school system functions in practice. Analogously, a classroom teacher working at a large Title 1 elementary campus can work in their classroom for twenty years and never truly understand how the campus globally operates from a financial, curricular, or systems perspective. Thus, if it is complicated for an insider, the newspaper reporter is totally reliant on information supplied by the district office, teacher union or education advocates.

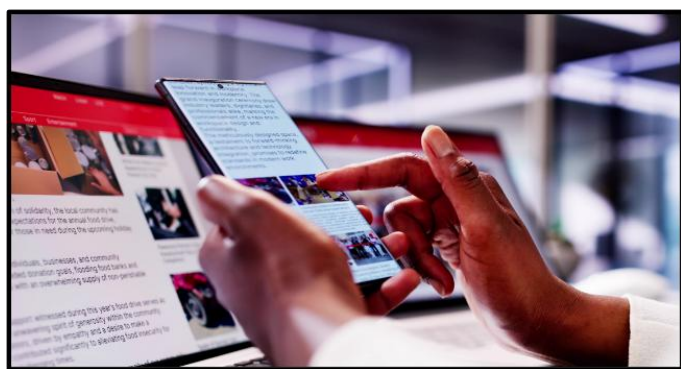


However, does the person supplying the information possess any concrete credibility? Have they successfully ever worked in a low-income school and eliminated the achievement gap at that campus, or

significantly heightened student outcomes? The answer to those two questions to the information supplier should always be asked.

An education news reporter is also an outsider to the education system who has a 20,000-foot viewpoint of campus and district processes, and they generally do not know the questions and follow-up questions to ask. They are provided with information from district sources promoting the organization's agenda. Again, there are so many moving parts and noise that it is difficult to ascertain simple truths. Furthermore, district and campus administrators are not sharing accurate and in-depth information with a newspaper reporter for obvious self-preservation reasons.

Additionally, a reporter must be granted physical access to visit the district schools, and they can only receive that permission and interview campus personnel from the district's Public Relations (PR) Office. Thus, they are placed in an awkward position. The investigative reporter wants to seek out a good story, but they cannot 'burn bridges' in doing so. Or the PR department chief can, at will, indefinitely delay or deny their future requests to access and interview school personnel. Journalists must walk a fine line to maintain a working relationship with district officials. Also, it is easy to be deceived by job titles and graduate degrees of either a master's or doctorate degree that imply competence and knowledge in school processes. Consequently, it is difficult for any education outsider to fully understand that highly paid campus and district administrators as well as university professors often lack a deep understanding of **effective** academic reformation processes.



The digital information revolution has also changed the investigative end of reporting on school affairs. As the new digital area expands, the newspaper industry has declined in most American cities, and journalists have found it increasingly difficult to keep their jobs. Reporters have found it necessary to transform and upgrade their services into a modern-day human being Swiss Army knife of marketable journalistic skills. No longer can they be employed solely as a newspaper investigative reporter; they must also be able to

perform a varied number of tasks including copy editing or reporting on multiple areas such as the police or municipality services. This added duty spreads them thinner, and they are unable to thoroughly research only educational stories. If they are an educational reporter, they also have a vested interest in maintaining a positive relationship with the local school system or educational advocate group since that may be an employment option for them in the future. It is for all these reasons that investigative journalists are not able to analytically probe into the reasons for the chronic poor performance of the public school system.

It is of vital importance to understand that a superintendent or deputy superintendent is not overly concerned with district insiders (teachers, principals, etc.) knowing there are problems and poor structural systems within the organization. However, they are more than a little anxious when an outsider may have a thorough understanding of ineffectiveness or incompetence. That situation is a potential risk to them personally, professionally and financially, but it also presents the possibility of a loss of public confidence in their leadership ability. In fact, all organizations I have worked in professionally over my career from engineering to finance to public education operate in that same mode of thinking at most management levels. In short, senior leadership rhetorically asks, 'Who all knows about this?' Over four decades of professional work in differing government capacities and agencies, I am amazed at the number of mishandled and embarrassing incidents that never became public.

Question 9: – Are weekly campus staff meetings and monthly administrator meetings effective?

Unfortunately, meetings are a necessary evil in any profession. If there is an issue that is too complicated to be handled by a group email or text message, it is time for a face-to-face meeting. The central idea of Question 9 is that the focus on physical meetings is always conditional on organizational and mission priorities – with performance outcomes as the final driving force. Now, let's tackle the two primary types of meetings: weekly staff meetings and monthly administrator meetings.

Weekly staff meetings – like all meetings – must have a reason to be called. Otherwise, the weekly gatherings can create morale issues due to a monopolization of teachers' time. Teacher's time is valuable, and it should not be disrespected. The meeting – like all meetings – should not only have a stated objective on the agenda, but it should also have an anonymous evaluation survey. I was a classroom teacher for six years, and I cannot remember either of those two elements at our weekly scheduled faculty meeting. In my opinion, we met for therapeutic reasons in lieu of task performance improvement. The principal must ask, “*What is my message, and do we need to physically meet to discuss the issue?*” **If not, do not meet.** As an elementary campus principal for a decade, I rarely called weekly faculty meetings – maybe one or two per semester, total. Usually, my campus communicated via email or met in small group settings. **Why?** The topic of discussion only affected intermediate teachers, primary teachers or a single grade level. For example, the entire faculty does not need to listen to a long discussion that only impacts fifth grade. In general, elementary principals schedule a weekly meeting because they think that's what they are supposed to do as the campus instructional leader. Alternatively, the messaging could have been handled in a 2-to-5-minute email, not an hour-long meeting in the library. I have always preferred instructional and curriculum-focused meetings—either through grade-level team sessions with specific modeling, or in classrooms where strategies are demonstrated directly with students when appropriate. In my experience, these types of meetings are consistently more efficient, effective, and promote greater accountability than traditional 'sit-and-get' faculty meetings. In my professional experience, those types of meetings are always much more efficient and effective.



Similarly, districtwide issues and changes may require that administrator meetings are needed with all campus administrators present. Central office administration usually schedules these monthly meetings at the beginning of the school year, so principals can plan their personal and professional schedules to attend. However, I have been on both sides of the table in these meetings – a principal and a central office administrator. As with weekly faculty meetings, I have my opinion and concern about their overall usefulness. In the two decades, I attended these monthly administrator meetings in two large school districts, and I rarely found them engaging or useful. I discovered that 95 percent of the focus of the meeting could be skipped with impunity – since the information



was not relevant to school academics. The 5 percent that was relevant was usually due to a remarkable event in the district that needed to be addressed in a face-to-face meeting, or it focused on standardized testing procedures. However, in general, the monthly meeting is a lost opportunity that principals should have spent on their campus supporting teachers and students. Over my career as a district and campus administrator, I concluded that the monthly administrator meetings were mainly scheduled to justify the existence of a central office administrator's job.

The monthly principal meetings rarely had a purpose, and they never altered the academic plight of Title 1 campuses. In fact, I can only recall three incidents in all the years I was in attendance that salient and useful information was presented to elementary campus principals. Although this synopsis of public-school meetings may convey a harsh perspective, in my entire professional career, I do not know one campus administrator that was an effective leader at their campus that would disagree with my own view. It was discussed in detail during my tenure as an administrator. Moreover, in response to the question posed, I propose that one school board trustee attend each of these monthly administrator meetings. If board trustees began attending the monthly meetings, it is my belief that these monthly meetings would either not be scheduled or greater emphasis would be placed on developing a much more effective agenda.

Question 10: – Are all-day or out-of-town conferences effective forms of professional development?

Professional development (PD) at a school or a business is based on one thing – organizational need! Thus, if a principal or district administrator is planning a professional development session for educators, the need for that training must be firmly established. Moreover, after the professional development training, thorough follow-up is needed to ensure that the pedagogical practice with instruction or curricular programming was correctly implemented. At that time, other adjustments and tweaks may need to be made in the form of more classroom modeling, for instance. These situations are always ad hoc in nature depending on the type of instruction or curricular resource and how they are implemented in the classroom. Finally, how is the educational effect of professional development measured? Was there any measurable means included in the presentation of the workshop that allows either formative or summative analysis? In short, how does the administrator know if the investment is producing desired or predicted results?



Unfortunately, with the exception of my own school when I was a principal, I mostly experienced PD that appeared to be thrown together at the last minute, or it had no clear intention or purpose in addressing a classroom or school need. More than that, there was never a follow-up to any professional development. Thus, in answering Question 10, I would emphatically state, “No.”

This situation is valid for in-house professional development or out of town PD. Of course, the obvious and key aspect to most educators of the out-of-town PD is the geographical location. If the professional development conference is in San Francisco, New Orleans, Miami or New York City, then educators can enjoy the local sites on the school district's nickel. Honestly, over the years in public education, educators look forward to out of town PD because it is a professional benefit that they are often unable to experience. Although the distance PD is expensive with airline travel, hotel accommodations, and food per diem allowances, teachers' morale is significantly heightened. However, from a general perspective, it is not effective in altering

the course of direction at the campus. No matter how many taxpayer dollars are expended on PD, the Title 1 schools do not improve their academic prowess. In short, the vast number of distance ‘PD’ sessions are a waste of resources and money.

It is paramount to stress that campus professional development can be extremely effective in enhancing classroom management, pedagogy and curricular resource use. However, the lead administrator must isolate the school’s need for training and model their expectations to teachers in a staff meeting **and** in their classrooms. Then, the teacher implements the process in front of their students while the administrator or instructional specialist observes and notes the educator’s strengths and areas of improvement as well as any areas that require improvement. Within a 24-hour period, the teacher and administrator should meet and debrief. During that session, they should adjust and tweak the process, as needed. There should also be, at a minimum, formative assessments to determine the effectiveness of professional development, and a summative analysis at some point later in the school year. In short, the most effective professional development training is on-campus and tailored to meet a specific need. Teachers are held accountable in their classrooms with observed modeling with the teacher emulating the pedagogy. Then, there is a debrief and follow-up, as needed.

Question 11: – Do charter public school systems provide better academic programming than the traditional public school system?

The answer to this question, like most questions that are layered, is: *It depends!* Charter public schools have been impactful on the public education industry. They have siphoned off many students from the traditional public school system across the country. However, the loss of students to charters has not resulted in the traditional system to consider improvements or changes in their classroom efficacy despite the loss of student revenue – one of the primary means to bring in revenue to a school system. The traditional public schools have countered by closing schools with low student enrollments as well as raised additional monies via tax referendums to offset the loss of student revenue.

Charter public schools generally operate with a more focused approach toward academics. They do not accentuate their attention to sports and athletic prowess as do the traditional public schools. Besides the added cost of athletic programs, charters are unlike the traditional system in that it is easier for the state education agency to close them for poor performance in financial operations or academics. Consequently, charters place more emphasis on academic prowess than do the traditional schools where I worked for much of my professional career in the public schools. However, I did work directly for two charter public school systems in Texas, and I have worked on consulting contracts with a couple more charter systems. Thus, I am familiar with the means that both charter and traditional public schools operate and define organizational priorities.

As the adage goes, charter systems can ‘turn on a dime.’ They operate with high degrees of independence. For example, they do not require teacher and administration certifications as do the traditional public school system. Hence, they can hire teachers and administrators with a wide range of professional experience, and they can also terminate educators at any given moment.



Traditional public schools operate under much more rigid conditions with educator certifications and defined bureaucracies in their organizational structure. Oddly, in general, it has not proven to produce much difference in academics between the two school systems. *Why?* I was surprised to

discover that charter's organizational structure emulates traditional systems when they achieve student enrollment populations between 10,000 to 15,000 students. They operate bureaucratically with larger than needed central office staff, as do the traditional public schools. Of course, it is hard to maintain quality in any organization whether private or public as the product or service expands and becomes higher in demand. As the organizational system expands – much more student revenue money begins flowing in, and both systems emulate themselves in a top-down hierarchical structure. In effect, the educational and management expertise is assumed to be at the central office. I believe this is one of the major reasons that charter public schools do not more easily distance themselves academically from their traditional competitors once they scale in size. The same lack of academic reformation expertise and knowledge exists at charter systems, and unfortunately, they become entrenched by egos and high paying administrative salaries.

In conclusion, a few charter public school systems are performing with marginally higher academic performance in some of their schools than traditional public schools with low-income students. Regrettably, some charter schools are so mismanaged that the traditional public schools appear to be a beacon of hope. They are not! Traditional public schools will not change their academic programming and ineffective pedagogy in their Title 1 campuses unless they are forced to do so by an external force – because it is obvious to anyone paying attention at this point that their school board trustees will not demand better student outcomes. In fact, charter schools were legislatively created as an educational vehicle to address the failure of the traditional public school system.

So, what is the answer to the question on academics between the two school systems posed in Question 11? In general, it is a mixed bag between charters and traditional public-school systems. Charters will change their academic programming much sooner than traditional school districts to improve academic performance. For example, charter founders generally are aware that dual language (i.e., bilingual programming) is ineffective in Title 1 schools, and for the reasons expatiated in Question 4, they do not implement it. If a charter system does implement dual language programs without extending the length of the school day, their literacy performance decreases to the same chronically low level as traditional public schools. ***This circumstance is not surprising since all systems drive consistent levels of performance.*** However, charters press and accelerate English instruction. They also adapt quicker to internal and external pressures, and in the end analysis, they more readily emphasize academics. There is also more accountability in charter school systems. For those reasons I believe charter school systems are generally a better academic vehicle for low-income children. In summary, if shown a way to better performance, a charter system will more readily change processes to produce higher student outcomes.

Question 12: – What effect did the COVID pandemic (actually) have on student learning?



The pandemic had a significant effect upon public education in several ways. **First**, many low-income students that were above the grade level mark regressed well below that mark. So, after the pandemic ended, the number of students below grade level had markedly increased. **Second**, educators and parents discovered how important a role that an elementary teacher plays in children's lives. Distance learning lessons could not produce the same level of accountability as in-class learning does. Moreover, parents learned the high number of minutes of downtime that occurs in classrooms as students finish their lessons – with little productivity in learning after that point. Parents became aware that substantial downtime

must also occur with in-class lessons each day. **Third**, a significant number of classroom teachers discovered during the pandemic that work-life balance away from the school was easier than in it. Consequently, there were high numbers of teachers that were not excited about continuing their work as an educator in the public schools, and they reconsidered their career plans – and as a result, teacher shortages across the country ensued. Principals soon discovered that teachers would readily quit at any time, and that this threat afforded teachers an upper hand in their daily work – even when those habits produced substandard pedagogy. However, many principals felt forced to allow substandard professional behavior because of the teacher shortage. It is not that classroom teachers are ‘different’ because of the pandemic. That is the wrong conclusion to draw from the incident. The pandemic allowed a general adverse effect on many public schools because principals tolerated mediocre work ethics and allowed this relaxed, lackadaisical behavior to become normalized.

The salient point that is often missed concerning COVID by the public in general, school board trustees and government lawmakers is that – Yes, there was substantial learning loss for low-income students during the pandemic. There is little doubt or disagreement about that conclusion. However, the learning loss affected low-income schools much more directly than their more affluent counterparts. The higher income students’ parents could not only supplement learning at home, but they could more easily afford to pay and enlist commercial tutors to academically catch-up their children. More importantly, low-income students had the **exact** prior grade level learning skill deficits as before COVID, **but after the pandemic, there were many more of them academically behind than before**. School personnel did not know the means to address those academic numeracy and literacy skill gaps *before* the pandemic, and to this day, they do not know how to address the same issue *after* the pandemic. Expectedly, public schools are performing academically worse after COVID than before because there are more children that are behind.

Since there is little administrative expertise in **effective** academic reformation of Title 1 public schools, it is not surprising that school data would be significantly less each spring in the short-term. However, there is a startling issue that has developed. Post-COVID academic performance remains exceedingly low for students that were enrolled in their prekindergarten and kindergarten years at the time of the pandemic, and currently, they are in the intermediate grades. In fact, in the spring of 2026, students that are assessed as third graders were not yet enrolled in prekindergarten. They were three-year olds home with their caretakers during COVID. How could their academic performance be so much lower than comparable pre-pandemic academic data, when academic data in low-income schools was already embarrassingly low at that time. There is no excuse for that situation to occur. There is not a pandemic and learning loss to blame, at this point. There is only ineffective administrative leadership in employing effective academic reformation at both the campus and the district level. It is difficult to believe school officials when they continue to blame the mediocre academic performance in Title 1 schools on a medical calamity when students that are not doing well were not directly impacted by COVID learning loss in the first place. Those students were not enrolled in school at that time of the pandemic. They were too young.



Fortunately, the academic solution in resolving low academics in the Title 1 elementary schools **before** the pandemic is the same one that works as **after** the pandemic. Only the implementation of what is needed will likely not occur without accountability from the folks that supervise the school superintendent and provide the school system with money. It will take school board trustees and state legislators to demand that school and

district administration employ pedagogy and curricular stopgap programs that meet children where they are academically – or there will be ramifications to the continued tenure of administrative leadership positions.

Question 13: – What specific actions should a campus administrator of a low-income Title 1 campus employ to significantly and dramatically raise student academics?

Fortunately, urban and rural Title 1 academic campus reform is the same process. It only takes the reformation knowledge in implementing the processes that matter – and consistently carrying out the work and motivating students. In conjunction with reformation know-how, the two key words at the end of the last sentence cannot be overemphasized – *consistency* and *motivation*.

Let's discuss specific actions that dramatically heighten student achievement in literacy and mathematics in Title 1 elementary schools.

First, in any human activity, sustained high performance is always driven by motivation, repetition and consistency of systems – and the systems employed must be the ones that make the difference. In my professional experience, the main reason that low-income schools do not improve is because the principal does not maintain focus on the elements that matter in the academic reformation of their campus. They begin by implementing the correct curricular programming, and then they lose focus and begin to allow teachers to take short cuts or, in some cases, abandon the routine altogether. The second main reason for depressed student outcomes is the failure of campus administrators to enforce effective student management at their school. Time on task, active engagement and efficient classroom routines are key factors in increasing student engagement throughout the school day. Downtime must be minimized. The last primary reason that low performance remains chronic is when the principal and teachers acquiesce the educational loss of students by not motivating and assisting the bottom academic third of their students to master the content presented in daily core lessons – or supplemental stopgap curricular programs. In effect, classroom pedagogy evolves into an existential instructional philosophy of, *“If the child gets it, they get it. If they do not, they don't! And the teacher moves on.”* This style of classroom teaching is common in the mass of charter and traditional public elementary, middle and high schools across the country. In pragmatic reality, a significant number of students classified as ‘general education’ learn concepts slower than their peers, and they require more repetitions to master content. The teacher must employ a spaced repetition pedagogical methodology to provide educational equity in their classroom. If this is not done, those students become further and further behind until they can qualify for special education services even though they are NOT in need of them.



Note: There is a final consideration that also negatively impacts the school reformation process. It occurs when the principal and/or teachers **continue** to use ineffective curricular resources or programming. These programs compete with the supplemental stopgap programs that directly address students' academic literacy and numeracy gaps. The reasons for continued use of ‘sacred cow’ programming are also three-fold: the educator likes the program; the program aligns with their educational philosophy, or they do not know it is not producing an increase in student achievement.

Second, the next issue in academic reformation is knowledge of *what* supplemental curricular process is needed to rapidly close low-income students' literacy and numeracy gaps – that the Tier 1 curriculum works



as designed. It is imperative to state the following fact: *All tier 1 curriculum is designed under the assumption that the learner does not have skill gaps.* In short, all Tier 1 curriculum is **grade level** curriculum. Any educator that has experience working as an educator in a Title 1 elementary school is aware that most low-income children arrive at school at the start of prekindergarten and kindergarten with literacy word gaps in comparison with their more affluent peers attending non-Title 1 elementary schools.

Academic literacy skill gaps for low-income children are present for both non-English speakers in their native language (i.e., ELs or ELLs), as well as children whose native tongue is English. Thus, low-income children begin their formal school years academically behind; however, they are taught using a Tier 1 English language arts curriculum that is grade level throughout their public-school years. Literacy gaps must be directly and systematically addressed – they are not miraculously going away on their own. A non-educator will better understand prior academic skill gaps using a developmental analogy at the university level. For instance, if a college student is enrolled in Spanish-3 (i.e., third semester Spanish), then their course is taught with Spanish-3 curriculum – Tier 1 or grade level. However, that Tier 1 Spanish-3 curriculum assumes that the student has mastered the prior two semesters of Spanish (i.e., Spanish-1 and Spanish-2). If the college student has not mastered the content from the two prior semesters, they possess academic Spanish language gaps that will make Spanish-3 a very difficult course. They will not connect dependent concepts from the prior semesters in their Spanish-3 course. This situation is true for all content areas at any grade level that possess prior grade level dependent skills. Fortunately, it is much easier to handle these academic gaps in an elementary school since the children are in their beginning stages of learning or schooling. If not directly addressed, the academic gaps in literacy and mathematics widen in subsequent grade levels, and by middle school, it is a much more difficult task to rectify.

One of the initial steps is implementing two (2) stop-gap supplemental language word programs. The 1,000-word fluency program rapidly presses students to grade level content readiness. This program stresses not only word fluency of the most common words in the English language, but it directly focuses and mastery of listening, speaking and reading word skills – the linguistic skill areas that are depressed in comparison to middle- and high-income children of the same age. The program is layered differently for kindergarten children than first through fifth grades. Kindergarten is the first 100 words, first grade is up to 600 words, and second grade and upward is the full 1,000 words. These 1,000 words represent almost 90 percent of the words that a third-grade student will encounter while reading a vetted third grade level passage.

Of course, memorizing a lot of common words in any language acquisition process is not per se, learning the language, but it is one of the important first steps to press the students to grade level that are academically behind. The Science of Reading elements – phonics and phonemic awareness programs are critical elements in the literacy acquisition process as well as other important language curricular and instructional elements in the ELA process. A framework with all literacy elements is available for free download at the website provided in the footer of this document. The main takeaway is the combining of these rudimentary elements into an application process focusing on comprehension of guided novel studies and ultimately, independent reading with high comprehension ability – a reading teacher’s ultimate goal.

It is important to note that the English language is the only Indo-European language to strip masculine and feminine articles and nouns from its grammar structure. Thus, there are only three articles (i.e., a, an, the) and only one noun must be learned – not two. Consequently, an English word like ‘that’ is always that word, ‘that,’ as opposed to Spanish where ‘que’ can be used in so many different instances to represent different word

usages. This empirical language situation is another reason that makes mastery of the first 1,000 words so important – ‘there is a big bang for the buck’ in that process in a myriad of ways.

Finally, any person above the age of 14 years old attempting to learn a non-native language for the first time understands the importance of mastering listening and speaking skills of the target language. Otherwise, it is almost impossible to cognitively process the non-native language during a conversation. The teenager or adult language learner cannot differentiate between where the words begin and end. A sentence that is spoken to them appears like one long word until the speaker stops speaking. Of course, those conversations are much more intricate than a primary aged elementary student



during the language acquisition process. The issue is that many non-native English speakers are trying to learn TWO ACADEMIC languages simultaneously – English and their native tongue. Approximately 10 to 15 percent of the children possess the cognitive processing power to accomplish this feat, but they are also left behind with regard to their higher mental processing skill level. *Why?* Classroom bilingual teachers are trying to handle the mass of students with varied skill levels – mostly behind grade level literacy. Title 1 classroom teachers unconsciously gravitate toward the pragmatic avenue of instruction via teaching to the middle level of students, ignoring the low and high academic students in their classrooms. In contrast, the two (2) stop-gap supplemental programs target every student in the classroom, if the programs are implemented with consistency over time. However, the campus administration must monitor these programs, so that some teachers do not ignore the bottom third of children that require more intervention time. The programs are so simply designed that they require less than 10 minutes per day in the primary grades (i.e., K-2nd grade), and the principal or instructional coaches can monitor teachers via a spreadsheet submitted digitally each Friday, at week’s end. Additionally, the two stopgap supplemental programs are free downloads. *Question 6 (previously shared) on the Science of Reading also has useful information on academic literacy reformation.*

The writing aspect of literacy is aided by the other free supplemental stopgap curricular resource – the 800-word non-negotiable word program. As the 1,000-word fluency supplemental program accelerates students to grade level reading in conjunction with the other literacy elements, the 800 non-negotiable addresses the monstrosity of spelling in the English language. As the English language evolved over the last 800 years, the orthography of common English words drifted from their oral pronunciation. For example, it is almost impossible for children to correctly spell the following common words without prior knowledge of their precise spelling: said, why, make, where, what, about, house, name, when, school, which, etc., etc., etc.

English spellings of so many common words began to change dramatically in the Middle English era, and it is a topic that is addressed in other short essays and white papers I have written. However, it is paramount to stress that professional linguists estimate that 25% of English words do not follow a phonics rule, and 3% of words are so mangled in their spelling that they must be memorized by rote. The 800-word supplemental program corrects this situation for low-income students as well as their more affluent peers that also struggle in orthography of common English word spellings. The 800-word non-negotiable program is used in many public schools because of its efficiency and effectiveness – and it is free!

Like the 1,000-word supplemental fluency word stopgap program, the 800-nonegotiable word program is also layered by grade level. In kindergarten, there is not a program since children are in the early stages of language in which they employ ‘invented spelling’ of words based on their sounds. Thus, if a 5-year-old spells the word

‘school’ as either ‘skool’ or ‘scol,’ that invented spelling outcome demonstrates that the child possesses basic understanding of the sounds of the targeted word. In short, it is good enough at that grade level, developmentally. In first grade, there is a modified non-negotiable word program, and from second grade upward, the regular 800-word program is in full force.

After third grade, with implementation fidelity, the program takes as little as 5 to 7 minutes per day, as needed; however, if the stopgap programs were implemented with consistency in the primary grades, the classroom teacher will focus mostly on the newly enrolled students more than students that attended their elementary school the prior year. Those students’ spelling woes on basic English words are over, and the mass of students in the classroom all possess the same skill set of demonstrating that they are capable of spelling English words correctly. The advantage is that a classroom teacher is providing Tier 1 literacy instruction, and all their students possess the same level of grade level skills. It is not the typical classroom in Title 1 elementary schools that is a mess of basic word skill bases that varies from student to student. Again, the 800-word nonnegotiable supplemental stopgap program is one piece of the English language arts curriculum. The framework is laid out on the website address in the footer – a free download.

The elimination of students’ mathematics’ skill gaps is a different intervention process than eradication of the academic literacy gap since the numeracy gap forms **after** children are enrolled in school. *The numeracy gap forms in the primary grades and if not rectified, widens in the intermediate grades.* In middle school (6th grade), as arithmetic ends, innumerate students are wholly unprepared for the algebraic and geometric coursework in seventh and eighth grades. Consequently, the elementary principal is in two different situations when initiating a global systematic program to eradicate math numeracy gaps.



The initial situation is when a principal begins a global academic reformation numeracy program schoolwide. In the beginning, a typical Title 1 school is in numeracy chaos since students possess a wide range of mathematics processing and math fact skill levels. Intermediate students (i.e., third through fifth grade) will demonstrate differing numeracy skill levels; thus, it is difficult for a teacher of any experience level to control the learning environment during core lessons since so many dependent math skills from prior grade levels were never mastered. For instance, some students will know their addition facts only, some their addition and subtract facts, and a few children will know multiplication and division to mastery. Processing skills are no different. A varying percentage of children will have mastery of even/odd, place value, decimals, fractions, etc. The typical Title 1 intermediate grade math teacher is attempting to provide grade level instruction to their children, and they all possess a combination of different prior grade skill level deficiencies. Any Title 1 educator understands this situation all too well. Consequently, the principal must first focus their attention on the intermediate grades. They must stop the bleeding in those grades, or those students transition to middle school with arithmetic skill deficiencies that will overwhelm them in their seventh grade algebraic course. So, the first year is one of focused work. However, there needs to be a dual thrust of eradicating the academic numeracy skill gaps of both math facts and processing skills, while simultaneously addressing grade level problem solving skills. Again, the website address in the footer clearly expounds on the process, so that this work can be accomplished. Spoiler Alert: Math can be completely turned around in a Title 1 campus with no achievement gap in one school year – not four or five. It is important to note that numeracy skills in mathematics are analogous to the essential skill of fluency in literacy.



The second layer of academic turnaround begins in year 2 – moving the numeracy focus to 2nd grade (and third grade, since the second graders from the prior year are now third graders). Returning fourth and fifth grade students that were enrolled the year before are grade level ready, and any new enrollees to those two upper grades must be specifically targeted to provide those students with an equitable arithmetic education. There will only be four to six students per class, so despite upwards of 30 percent mobility, it can be handled with focused work. It is important to note that those students will stand out due to their numeracy gaps in comparison to the returning students. They cannot hide as they

have done in other years. Finally, in year 3, first and second grade is an added focus. At this point in time, the numeracy gaps are not forming as they have in the past years in the primary grades. The entire global numeracy and problem-solving process is manageable for every student on campus.

Math performance at the end of year 1 is dramatically higher due to the focus on the intermediate elementary grades, and the literacy scores will be significantly higher, but it only requires a year for mathematics (and science). The literacy performance is usually a year and a half (two-year turnaround on standardized testing window). The educational administration textbooks state that it takes 4 to 5 years to academically turn around a Title 1 elementary school in literacy and mathematics. This statement is patently false; it takes 1 to 2 years with a relentless focus on developing numeracy skills by both the Title 1 principal and staff. The numeracy skills are then applied in a story or word problem application. The problem-solving piece is covered in detail as well in the white papers that are available as free downloads in the footer of this document.

In conclusion, these are the abridged steps to dramatically heighten academic performance of low-income schools. If the principal is willing to put in the work and organize global systems, it is a straightforward procedure or methodology. ***If they are not willing to change, there is a one-hundred percent probability that low student achievement in literacy and math will continue indefinitely. If Title 1 schools have empirically proven one thing in the last half century, it is that!*** The academic literacy and numeracy gaps are not vanishing on their own. It takes a simple, consistent plan and an instructional leader to guide the campus to academic equity. As with personal and commercial financial success, a small number of winners in stock picks or product lines often dominate the lion's share of overall performance gains. The same is true in academic reformation. It is the three effective stopgap literacy and numeracy curricular programs as well as effective classroom management and efficient daily routines that significantly affect student achievement. It's the small things that directly address the root cause behind the stagnate outcomes in both literacy and numeracy that yield dramatic performance increases. In short, a small number of high-impact actions, when implemented with fidelity, drive the majority of meaningful outcomes.

The one last point that must be clearly understood by the non-educator is that the supplemental stopgap literacy and math programs must be simply designed so any teacher of any experience level can equally implement them to fidelity. This aspect of academic reformation is one of the key points that hinges on GENERAL success of the process. The reformation process must work everywhere under all conditions, including hiring classroom teachers. Title 1 principals must hire teachers from a pool of candidates that range from entry-level teachers, alternative certified educators with little classroom training, and as many seasoned teachers that are available. It is important to emphasize that a general method must allow for the normal hiring of a faculty and not hiring specific skilled veteran teachers to be onboarded at specific academic struggling low-income schools

for additional money or stipends. It is impossible to hire that many specialized, seasoned teachers across the board in so many Title 1 schools in one urban district, let alone the State of Texas, Ohio, Illinois, Florida, California or Pennsylvania.

Consequently, novice classroom teachers must be able to implement stopgap curricular resources with equal effectiveness as a veteran classroom teacher in the adjacent classroom. If not, then the academic reformation process that does not directly address the needs of low-income children, or require highly experienced educators, will never be a viable solution in Title 1 elementary schools. In summary, the supplemental stopgap resources must be simple and directly address student needs and be agnostic of the Tier 1 curriculum selection as well as classroom teacher experience.



However, the Tier 1 curriculum should be a structured and sequenced resource. It cannot be a haphazard, non-repetitive curricular resource or a pedagogical approach when at least a third of the enrolled students are not presented with a threshold number of repetitions to master the content into their long-term memory. Again, the problem-solving piece and adapting to the digital testing environment of standardized testing is the last stage of the reformation process. It is the easiest part of the global system to handle for the campus administration. Students' problem-solving ability is wholly dependent upon math fact and math processing skill sets. *Why?* A traditional math word or story problem is nothing more than a short passage with embedded numeracy skills (i.e., math fact and processing skills). Solving the numeracy skill gap issue, and problem solving is an easy target to hit a bullseye. Developmentally, as a professional engineer registered in the State of Texas to this day, the only problems that are difficult to solve are the ones where one does not possess the acumen mastery of the dependent skills.

I believe it is important to note that many districts/schools are implementing "math workshop" or "guided math" models which have the teacher spend only 10-15 minutes on whole group math instruction. The rest of the time students are placed in stations while the teacher works with a small group. Far too many students are not engaged at this time. I am of the opinion that this pedagogical practice is part of the reason elementary schools (especially Title 1 campuses) are doing so poorly in mathematics.

Question 14: – Why don't school and district administrators change their practices to more effective ones to heighten student achievement?



I have been asked this question the most frequently in my professional career. The question seems to make no sense to the non-educator and educational enthusiast. However, the situation does become clearer with a little more understanding of the public-school industry – which operates very uniquely compared to almost every other professional field.

Public school systems operate via local control – a legacy from the agrarian days more than a century past; hence, they are independent school districts – stressing the word 'independent.' Each district – whether a charter or a traditional public school system is governed by a board of trustees. The trustees have only one employee – the superintendent or the charter founder of that public school

system. One of the superintendent's or founder's primary functions is to apply consistent pressure on district administrators to hold school personnel accountable for raising social and academic achievement, and school districts are not a complicated hierarchical system of organizational control. However, the most important part of the accountability process in public schools is the school board trustees. *Why?* They initiate the accountability process at the organization. Thus, when there are consistently poor academics at a school district (regardless of type) school year after school year, it is the school board that should answer for those results. They are not doing their jobs. The superintendent or founder will continue to perform to the expectations of their oversight authority. When the lead administrator is not held accountable, they do not hold their district office administrators' accountable, and the 'accountability ball' continues to roll down the hill all the way to the classroom. Thus, the first reason that administrators do **not** change their ineffective and ideological curricular beliefs, practices and pedagogy, is that there is no real accountability. Basically, there is no fear of failure. Few if any administrators lose their high paying job or are summarily demoted when the results on Title 1 campuses do not appreciably improve over prolonged periods of time.

Since school boards do not hold a superintendent or a charter founder accountable, subordinate district and school administrators have no fear of failure. In effect, there is no professional accountability with chronic student outcomes.

The philosophical and control structure of schools and school districts is learned at the universities where administrators are trained. The top-down system of punditry without results begins at undergraduate and graduate schools. University professors in the college of education indoctrinate educators at all levels. They instill their belief system on the mass of educators that will leave and run the classrooms and the school system. Consequently, teachers and administrators unconsciously exit their universities with a set of philosophical and ideological educational beliefs that demonstrate little evidence of performance. In fact, I believe many education professors would not consider the current literacy and mathematics performance as failing – despite objective annual assessments that state otherwise. From my personal conversations, I get a sense that professors believe that the school system is doing the best it can with children of poverty.

The result is that it is more than a little difficult to reform the public education system since there is no fear of failure at any level, from the university to the schools themselves.

I also believe the issue still goes deeper than no fear of failure. Graduate schools do not offer coursework or productive discussions in effective academic reformation, or if the topic is mentioned, it is discussed at a 20,000-foot perspective. Thus, as previously mentioned, administrators never learn the means to address the achievement problem during their graduate studies. In a word, administrators do not know what academic achievement problem they are trying to solve. Initially, to the non-educator this statement may appear odd. *How can district and school administrators not know what is causing the achievement problem?* I recommend asking them; they will not know. I guarantee it. I have discovered time and time again that their response to the question of continued nonperformance is vague and without specifics. This lack of a solution to chronic academics is not isolated and specific to Texas, Pennsylvania or Florida in Title 1 schools. Across the country, educators never isolate the root cause of stagnant academics at low-income schools. Hence, they have the same academic problem that they had the year before and the years before that.

If principals realize the academic processes within the school system are wholly ineffective, and they 'buck the system' by implementing academic reform initiatives contrary to the prevailing philosophical winds, they

do risk professional consequences – demotions, loss of annual income and retirement benefits. The whole system of chronic low-income school failure is self-perpetuated within the system. In fact, a change agent administrator often discovers that they are fighting a significant portion of their own staff and central office administrators when they attempt to initiate change to a dogmatic public education system. Change agents threaten not only job preservation, but an educational philosophy that is held as sacrosanct.

Case in point: At the end of my first year as an urban Title 1 principal, the academic results at my campus in mathematics and literacy dramatically improved to the levels of non-Title 1 elementary schools. Central office curriculum administrators not only ignored our success each school year, but they also intentionally discredited all they thought we were doing at the campus. Another elementary principal emulated our approach and achieved the same high level of student achievement as that of non-Title 1 elementary schools in the district and the State of Texas. We both struggled to find district acceptance despite eliminating the infamous achievement gap with inordinately high academic achievement at our campuses school year after school year. Over the years, I unfortunately discovered that our situation was not an exception, but more the rule to the means that school districts operate. It is important to realize that a focused campus principal can change the academic situation at their Title 1 campus, but any improvements to adjacent Title 1 schools are usually curtailed by central office forces. Finally, one of the reasons that high ranking district administrators do not promote successful Title 1 principals or highly successful academic reformation consultants is because of the most basic conclusion that a school board trustee would most likely ask, “*Why are we paying hundreds of thousands of dollars of salaries to superintendents and their associate and deputy superintendents if a campus principal or a consultant has a more effective and efficient process to academically fix struggling campuses?*”



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I would be remiss and unfair if I did not mention that college education professors and school administrators want to better academics at low-income schools. However, they want **their** belief system to work, not a competing academic reformation method that does not subscribe to their educational beliefs regardless of its form. Thus, the public education status quo ignores ideas, arguments, and curricular programs that compete with their own belief system, and they will go so far to discredit any successful reformation process to shut it down. Again, since there is not much accountability in the public education system, this is easily accomplished at colleges of education as well as urban and rural school districts. It is not only self-preservation, administrative capacity, annual income and lucrative retirement benefits that are at play in this competition. Of course, that does matter to both central office and campus administrators, but it is a staunch and dogmatic belief in their philosophical view of public education as well as their personal world view that mainly governs their actions and thinking.

Frankly, like most people, many educators are not information seekers. They have an idea of what schools do and what teaching is or should look like in the classroom – and that is their consistent mental and physical go-to. They have an educational philosophy and despite performance evidence that it is ineffective, they continue to believe it. Moreover, educators frequently view themselves as the captain of the ship, and they continue with that same course as they have done in the past. If another Title 1 elementary school is performing

exceedingly well less than a mile away, it is highly probable that the academic struggling Title 1 elementary school does not adapt to the more effective pedagogy, systems and curricular programming. Since there is not high accountability in school districts from the superintendent to the campus administrator, there is no consistent force directing effective change from school year to school year unimpeded by outcomes. Of course, it is always easy to blame COVID, parents, teachers, lack of fidelity, etc. for the lack of performance. Additionally, when the standardized testing results arrive, it is late in the school year and campus results are viewed as more of an autopsy than as a change in direction opportunity. Summer vacation awaits – and three months is a long time to forget the sins of the prior school year. As August nears, a new school year begins, the cycle is repeated, and there is no dramatic improvement in that school year as well.

Finally, and sadly, some teachers and administrators, after years of chronic performance, simply become jaded and resigned that the academic direction cannot be redirected. They dismiss, ignore or acquiesce the long-term dire and bleak economic future of the children that remain below grade level in both mathematics and literacy. There is also a smaller group of educators that reject any successful academic reformation model. This cadre of educators, albeit small, appears to believe that if they did not think of the solution, then it cannot exist. I was constantly surprised by this reaction over my three decades since I initially entered public education after careers in both structural engineering and finance. In those fields, solutions to problems are celebrated, but not to small and sometimes influential central office administrators and educational advocates. Fortunately, this group is small, but they exist in every school district and charter system where I worked during my career and consulted after retirement.

Question 15: – How could AI – Artificial Intelligence – impact the public school system and student learning?



Artificial Intelligence (AI) is coming soon to a school near you. It will be impactful on so many school elements over time in some of the following areas: curricular resource creation, lesson plan design, core lesson delivery analysis, classroom management, general paperwork completion, formative and summative evaluations, analysis and intervention of prior grade level academic skill gaps, and personnel reduction. And, that is just the beginning!

A couple of the public education areas where AI is already in use are lesson plan construction and curricular resource creation. Classroom teachers that are early adopters are taking advantage of AI’s capabilities as of this writing. However, much more is to come over the next decade. For example, AI software will be able to detect when a student is distracted, and there will be an engagement process to refocus the student – lessening classroom management issues.

Another development will be the feedback on the teacher’s instructional delivery of the daily lesson. AI can ‘listen’ to the lesson delivery and provide feedback to the educator to improve their pedagogical craft in this critical area. Eventually, AI will be able to evaluate students via formative evaluations and then provide exercises to rectify numeracy and literacy skill gaps in real time. This AI application will dramatically change Title 1 or low-income elementary and middle schools where educators have not made appreciable academic gains due to their inability to address prior grade level academic skill gaps. Once the skill gaps are closed, the Tier 1 or grade level curriculum will function as designed.

However, in the end analysis it is difficult to fathom that AI software will not reduce the number of classroom teachers. During the pandemic, it became apparent the importance of in-school learning in comparison to

distance learning. A human being will always be needed in and around the classroom; the only question is: ***How many teachers are needed?*** In the annual operating budget of any school district, labor costs are the dominant cost throughout the school year. Thus, if children can be rapidly accelerated to grade level so Tier 1 curriculum is immediately functional as it is in middle to high socioeconomic schools, then the question becomes: *Can I replace a fraction of teachers with less expensive paraprofessionals saving significant amounts of expenditures in labor costs at large, urban school districts?* The same thinking can occur in much smaller rural school districts where it is always difficult to hire teachers primarily due to availability. No matter the district enrollment size, an operating budget for the school year is always heavily dominated by direct labor costs – teachers. From an accounting perspective, a district’s capital budget is more easily fiscally managed than its annual operating budget.

There are already new models of school systems opening today with medium to high socioeconomic populations that utilize computer AI technologies of today and dramatically reduce the classroom hours during the instructional day. These children are learning other skills and interests since their basic curriculum is completed.

Consequently, if a child is on grade level without prior academic gaps, veteran educators are not surprised to learn that most students only spend a little more than 2 hours a day on instruction and activities. The remainder of the time is downtime – waiting for other students to finish the lesson assignments, subject transitions, or collecting homework and assignment work. Currently, these learning environments are medium to high socioeconomic campuses and not Title 1 schools where so many children possess prior grade level skill gaps. However, if AI software can rectify those academic skill gaps efficiently and effectively, then the same learning environment will be mirrored for the 60 percent of public schools classified as Title 1 in this country. At that point, less classroom teachers may be needed in Title 1 schools as well. With AI, classroom teachers and district administrators will always be needed, but we will probably need less of them.



In the traditional public education system, unlike charter school systems, state certifications via examination are required to work as either a teacher or an administrator. AI programming implementation may impact the education profession in this area. For example, can educators be trained and prepared differently using AI simulations, dramatically changing the certification monopoly of both university teaching and administrative programs? Moreover, once AI software learns to eradicate the academic numeracy and literacy gaps for each student, the need for less fully ‘certified’ teachers on the payroll will come into question. In effect, just as mechanical automation and digital innovation changed the labor force demands in almost every profession since the industrial revolution, I believe by the early 2030’s, the public school system will not escape similar personnel reduction from the implementation of AI software innovation in both the classroom and campus/district management. However, at some point in the AI evolution and revolution, I am confident school administrative personnel and university education training programs will fight these changes in the cause of self-preservation – and not via the AI results-based student outcomes.

Question 16: – What are the pertinent issues with a lack of academic improvement despite years of educational research?

In general, research is needed in any human endeavor from a physical construction process to every type of professional work. It is difficult to improve systems in any human endeavor without examining viable alternatives and entirely new means of innovative engagements in those processes. However, it is imperative that the research findings improve the situation of the industry – on the ground level, and then press forward

with innovation and advancement. *However, one of the main themes throughout this document is that over the last 60 years, Title 1 or low-income academic performance has not significantly improved despite educational research initiatives, studies, and methodologies consistently employed in the public schools over this long period of time.* At first glance, to the educational outsider, this lack of improvement probably does not make logical sense. But, in both the reality and perspective that insiders that work daily within the public education sphere, the absence of a significant increase in performance over such a long period of time does make pragmatic sense.



Of course, the last statements in the above paragraph are not absolute. There are bright spots in public education research. Let's examine a couple areas of literacy that research work has been both effective and efficient: phonics instruction, phonemic awareness, and developmental vocabulary curricular programs (e.g. three of five Science of Reading components).

First, the vocabulary work by Robert Manzano is thorough, pragmatic and if applied consistently, will drive student learning upward in that specific literacy focus. In fact, vocabulary curricular programs, in general, have been an educational highlight in research and development for decades. Simple vocabulary curricular programs created by Sadlier Oxford and Wordly Wise are both examples of simply designed, teacher-friendly, 'off-the-shelf' preparation-ready student programs – plug and play right out of the box. Again, if applied with fidelity, consistency, student accountability and threshold repetitions, these curricular programs are both efficient and effective and students are highly successful in the classroom – via any level of educator experience. ***The key to success with these types of curricular programs is they must be applied consistently with both threshold repetitions and student accountability.*** The teacher cannot skip weeks of vocabulary instruction, sound implementation, and pressing student accountability; then, expect significantly improved speaking and writing vocabularies. Second, phonics and phonemic awareness are also examples of curricular programming (and instruction) that have excelled via educational research. Effective and efficient curricular programs are available in each skill and instructional area. As annotated with vocabulary instruction, teachers must have sound fidelity and classroom controls to ensure that there is sufficient repetition and application with daily and weekly curricular programming.

It is important to note that school and district administrators' failure 'go-to' rationale of their curricular initiatives is that classroom teachers did not use the resource or curriculum with fidelity. In some instances, this criticism possesses validity. However, in the majority of situations, it does not. More often than not, their curricular programs were implemented with fidelity, but they did not address the salient academic issues at Title 1 campuses, and their system designs are usually ideologically and philosophically driven – and not driven on student data that focus on heightening student outcomes. Moreover, their curricular programs are invariably complicated; thus, classroom teachers, with less than 3 to 4 years of classroom experience, struggle with implementation. The fact that student outcomes are chronically low in the mass of Title 1 schools, where their curricular programming is implemented, is rarely, if ever, discussed or reflected upon in central office administration meetings. In contrast, the two main reasons that phonics, phonemic awareness and vocabulary curricular programs have been

so successful is they are simply designed so any novice or seasoned teacher can implement them with equal effectiveness, and secondly, they directly address students' academic needs.

Of course, there are a significant number of educators that emphatically state that these phonics, phonemic awareness and vocabulary programs are boring to teach. The counter argument is that these weekly programs are **not** boring **IF** the teacher develops strong, positive relational connections with their students, and they make learning exciting and fun. Students will follow a teacher's lead that they implicitly and explicitly trust. With strong relational classroom awareness, whatever content a teacher thinks and conveys to students, they will find inherent value in the learning activities. Moreover, students do not know the long-term negative implications that arise from not learning specific content; however, teachers and principals should and must know why specific content is important to hold students' accountable for long-term mastery, if they hope to become efficacious facilitators and heighten student outcomes in both the short and long term.

The brief overview above was intended to provide a general perspective of effective educational research as that physical product spirals down to the classroom level and ultimately to student learning. Thus, educational research must address a student or school need, but the research must be pragmatic and provide sound, viable, and thorough daily practice exercises for students to master the content. To clarify for the non-educator, let's provide an example that directly affects student learning. *Besides* the obvious reference to *effective* classroom management, one of the two key areas of student learning are active engagement and threshold repetition of the content. Of the two, let's isolate our discussion to repetition of content in the classroom. *Specifically, how many repetitions are required for students to possess adequate exposure to master application or skill-based content?*

Answer: It depends. Students classified as 'general education' require between 8 to 16 repetitions to ingrain skills and application content into long-term memory; whereas children classified as 'talented and gifted' only require 1 to 3 repetitions. However, the number of threshold repetitions to achieve content mastery for students receiving special education services can, and do vary widely based on their learning disability; hence, those children are provided with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to assist the classroom educator in providing the best learning approach for each student.



Thus, regardless of the quality of the educational research, if there are not basic student/human learning principles of pragmatic practice implemented in the classroom, students will **not** master the content. *Active* student engagement, classroom instruction and student accountability are all important achievement indicators, as is the need for sufficient repetition in achieving academic accomplishment. **Note:** 'spaced repetition' is a pedagogical method that addresses repetition demands in a dynamic daily format for 90 percent plus of the children in any type of socioeconomic classroom. Unfortunately, it is not a common pedagogical practice in any type of school setting in the United States.

Vocabulary, phonics and phonemic awareness curricular programming represent the positive side of educational research; however, question number 16 remains unanswered, from a general perspective. That overarching inquiry is, '*Why over the last six decades has the educational research provided by university researchers been so ineffective in raising student outcomes in literacy, mathematics and science on Title I campuses?*' So, let's drill down on this topic and examine the general educational research field in public education – its origination points from universities and the educators that conduct the research.

First, as discussed in Question 3, public school administrators attend graduate studies in the College of Education regardless if the pursued degree is a Master's or a Doctor of Philosophy. As stated, the professors in graduate courses rarely, if ever, discussed effective academic reformation processes of low-income schools. In fact, in my educational administrative master's program, not one of my professors had ever successfully guided a Title 1 school to academic success to any significant level, let alone eradicating the achievement gap between low- and high-income campuses. *In short, the educators conducting educational research all hail from the same source as they do for teaching and administration positions. This aspect of a single source public educator pool is key in understanding the lack of increase in academic performance school year after school year.*

Since educational researchers and professors are almost exclusively former teachers and public-school administrators – their thinking and understanding of the root cause of the achievement problem in Title 1 schools that has perplexed them since their first-year teaching in the classroom. Consequently, when educators become university professors and educational researchers, they continue to attempt to solve an achievement problem that they have never thoroughly solved in a classroom, school or district. Hold a short conversation with professors and researchers, and it will become glaringly obvious that they do not understand origination of the most important academic issue they are tasked with solving. Similarly, a simple Q and A session with any school or district administrator will resoundingly prove this same point to a curious outsider – politician, newspaper journalist, school board member or parent. The discussion will lack specific changes at the classroom level, pedagogy, stop-gap initiatives, and there will not be an accountable timeline for the eradication of the achievement gap. The conversation will be general in nature – at 25,000 feet – without a detailed process that rapidly elevates student outcomes. This lack of understanding of the true nature of the achievement gap is a main reason there has not been academic improvement in the mass of Title 1 schools in this country.

Second, in every professional field a culture of thinking and general philosophy develops over long periods of time. Public education, a soft science, is not an exception to this phenomenon. Each professional field establishes its belief systems, and in general, all industries resist change or more accurately, they are risk-adverse to new ideas that challenge the ideological and dogmatic views of an industry.

This phenomenon also occurs in hard science research fields when long standing and established ideas are challenged. For example, in 1912, Alfred Wegener proposed the theory of plate tectonics to explain continental drift. His theory immediately faced resistance, primarily due to the lack of a scientifically plausible mechanism for explaining the physical movement of continents. However, half a century later using seismic data and deep-sea floor exploration, his theory of continental drift was more readily accepted. Another example of hard science rejection to a new solution occurred in the late 1970's and early 1980's when Dr. Barry Marshall and Dr. J. Robin Warren proposed that ulcers were an infection that could be easily treated with antibiotics. Their thinking was significantly rejected by the medical industry, and both doctors were ridiculed for their proposal that contradicted the long-established medical norm of stomach ulcers. With persistence and dedication, their collaborative work not only earned them the 2005 Nobel Prize in Medicine, but it drastically improved the lives of millions of people that suffered from ulcerated stomach issues.

All educators at every level are trained from the same source – the same water well. It is a circular think tank that is both self-policed and insulated from external forces.

The lack of effective problem solving and understanding in academic reformation exists from the elementary classroom to the university where educators are trained.

The salient point about research is that regardless if the professional industry is a soft or a hard science setting, both types attempt to maintain the cultural, philosophical and ideological status quo in the field. *Of course, hard science research does have an advantage in quality controls as well as tested and repeated data results compared to soft science research.* Consequently, since educational research is a soft science, it is much easier to maintain an existing dogmatic philosophy and practices independent of student achievement, results and outcomes.



In my opinion, *elevating student outcomes are no longer a valued consideration of educational researchers in literacy, mathematics and science, or those educators would have changed their pedagogy and curricular methods due to a lack of accomplishment.* One reason is the lack of accountability in their ideas and programming since associated outcomes are easily dismissed. Moreover, it often appears to educational insiders that researchers appear to be more focused on advancing their personal philosophy of education or cultural beliefs on the public-school systems in comparison to the at-risk and low-income children’s short and long-term academic needs. Additionally, in a soft science industry such as public education, the industry is frequently controlled by dogmatic ideology. As a result, again, there is little to no improvement in student outcomes or school performance, but it is also precarious to rogue educators to challenge the status quo and ‘company line’ or one’s upward career mobility is often jeopardized. Those educators that do raise questions, propose or employ alternative solutions are often isolated, ignored or privately and publicly discredited. Of course, as described above, these negative consequences happen in hard science fields as well, but the occurrence is more frequent in the soft sciences since data and results can be conveniently overlooked, ignored and rationalized away. Finally, few outsiders, including school board members, newspaper reporters, parents and lawmakers possess the ability to truly understand the fundamental dynamics of the public education system. Thus, they are unable to pinpoint the fallacious logical justification in so many ineffective curricular initiatives or pedagogical practices.

Third, non-educators like parents, school board members, legislators or newspaper reporters invariably **equate** the soft-science term ‘educational research’ with engineering or pharmaceutical hard science research – a much more exacting, studied and **testable process**.



Throughout my three-decade career, I repeatedly heard the expression regarding a curricular system or pedagogy, *“Is it researched based?”* But the educational research initiatives that are defined as ‘research-based’ have been wholly ineffective in raising outcomes in low-income schools over the last 60 years. Then, this question begs to be answered: *“Why does this educational research-based mantra continue?”* Again, the research-

based mantra persists because non-educators’ understanding is that educational research is as thoroughly conducted as if it were a hard science process – when in reality, it is not. Educational research is a soft science

and by its very nature is unable to control the many moving variables of a school or classroom. The research is rarely, if ever, systematically, thoroughly, and scientifically pretested in a low-income setting prior to releasing university level white papers for publication. Educational researchers' white papers and publications often cite their initiatives as '*Best Practices*' attempting to provide a level of credibility to their work – regardless of the lack of elevation of student outcomes as an end product. One common oppositional response, from serious educators engaged in academic reformation, to this catch phrase term is the following: *Best Practices* should translate to *Best Results* – where children are all socially and academically successful at grade level instruction.

Fourth, the feedback loop of student results is another issue that benefits ineffective educational research as well as campus and district administrator accountability in public education. Standardized testing, discussed in Question 17, takes place at the end of the school year – usually in April and May, but results do not arrive until early June close to the time children are dismissed for their summer break. Therefore, performance data from standardized assessments are more of an autopsy than a timely adjustment to curricular systems and pedagogy. In effect, the long 9-month feedback loop as well as the 3-month summer holiday affords convenient leniency in honestly evaluating students' academic progress in the classroom or at a school. Pragmatically, the school year is over, and little can be done at the campus at that point to change what has already happened. Of course, in the preceding school year, there is also little academic improvement at Title 1 campuses across the country; hence, the summative evaluation of the results, rarely if ever, carries over for adjustment in the succeeding school year. But there is a larger issue, for all practical purposes, the long feedback loop of a normal school year provides for little to no objective analysis of the overall effectiveness and weaknesses of the Tier 1 curriculum, classroom instruction and intervention processes employed throughout the school year. And those three things are largely the initiative in today's classrooms of most of the implemented educational research – infallible and nonaccountable educational research.

Of course, it is paramount to stress that in addition to standardized test results, course and subject grades are traditionally released to parents every 9 weeks with the intent to indicate children's academic progress in core academic subjects. However, those school marks are invariably subjective to varying grading policies from teacher to teacher at the same school – as well as campus to campus within the same school district. The clearest evidence of *grade inflation* occurs when there is a large discrepancy between school grades and standardized testing performance. Standardized tests and classroom grades are (theoretically) both evaluations of grade level content mastery. For example, if a student is making A's in reading and writing for the entire school year on every 9-week report card, then that student should score equally well on a standardized literacy test come May, since both instruments are designed to assess a student's grade level competence on the state English language arts standards (i.e., Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)).

Lastly, a campus with a thousand elementary students is a busy place. It requires a campus administrator with a specific set of organizational, leadership and instructional skills to run global systems that address academic literacy and numeracy learning gaps. As stated previously in this document – ***prior grade level literacy and numeracy academic gaps are the root cause of academic failure in the public schools. If those gaps are not corrected, a student will invariably struggle with dependent skills and application of grade level curriculum.*** The Tier 1 (grade level) curriculum assumes no prior grade level gaps, but in a Title 1 elementary or middle school, they are omnipresent until directly addressed and eradicated. However, educational research invariably and conveniently ignores this crucial factor in low-income schools. What do educational researchers generally employ instead? They attempt to treat the effect and not the cause. One, they apparently do not know the root

cause – the academic numeracy and literacy gaps. Or, two, they know and suspect the cause, but they likely do not know how to solve the achievement problems globally on a low-income campus.

However, it is paramount to understand what ‘practice’ means. As mentioned above, it takes threshold practice at a task to commit the process to long-term memory. Pragmatically, it is not difficult to understand why students at select low-income schools do well at math or reading when at those campuses, the academic gaps are directly addressed and rectified. In comparison, the mass of children at different low-income schools are academically unsuccessful when their school does not employ stop-gap measures to directly address literacy and numeracy gaps.

Assuming the academic numeracy and literacy gaps are systematically addressed, the probability of a school’s social and academic success is straightforward. Once on grade level, low-income students are equally capable of excelling in grade level content as their more affluent peers. An axiom that states this phenomenon is as follows: *Whatever a student consistently practices, they will know. Whatever they do not, they will not.* In a word, if the teachers engage children consistently with accountability in literacy every day, then the students will do well in reading and writing. The same is true in mathematics and science. The converse is also true, unfortunately.

It is also important to note that if fundamental issues like heightening student achievement and eradicating inequity are solved, high-ranking administrator’s and professor’s influence as well as their high-salaried positions may rapidly disappear. In effect, by solving the achievement gap between low-income and high-income students, high-ranking educators have essentially eliminated their own position and function for all practical purposes. In many professional fields, there is a lot of money to be had via enactment of successful innovation and efficient/effective alternatives, but in public education, it is the opposite. There is a plethora of funding and additional monies in continued campus and district failure – the inability to improve usually incites more monies – not less.

Question 17: – What are the most pertinent issues concerning standardized testing in the public school system?

“A Standardized test is defined as “any test that’s administered, scored, and interpreted in a standard, predetermined manner,” according to by W. James Popham, former President of the American Educational Research Association. The tests often have multiple-choice questions that can be quickly graded by automated test scoring machines. Some assessments also incorporate open-ended questions that require human grading.”

In public education, standardized testing has been around for over 3 decades in Texas, but it became federally mandated for all states after the 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Beginning in third grade in April and May, elementary students sit for a reading/writing and math test. These two core assessments are given every year through 8th grade. Additionally, in fifth and eighth grade, students also take a science assessment as well as a social studies test in eighth grade.

Schools are busy places. But the question that logically follows is: “What are students actually busy DOING during the instructional day?”

Practice that matters means working on content that makes a difference – current grade level skills and rectifying numeracy and literacy skill gaps.

Then, continually extending mastered skills into application.



However, it is important for a non-educator to understand the geographic and comparative scope of public-school testing on the day students are assessed. Standardized tests in each content area are administered in **every** public school in the state, at the **same time**; thus, it is an objective means to compare students not just from school to school, urban to rural, but also from city to city as well. Moreover, student performance can be **directly** compared between students attending low-income schools/Title 1 campuses and non-Title 1 schools. The difference in the academic performance between those two school socioeconomic classifications is often referred to as the (infamous) *achievement gap*.’

A notable qualification is needed when discussing standardized testing that should be clearly stated at the onset. There will always be issues with a standardized test whether it is a public-school assessment, or an ACT/SAT college entrance test required by most universities in this country. For instance, the wording of several test questions may be an issue of clarity with some students. There could also be cultural issues with questions adversely affecting specific groups of students based on race, poverty or ethnicity. It is for these reasons and others that stated below that many educators and non-educators alike feel that standardized testing possesses inherent equity issues.

However, on the other hand, standardized test developers have crafted much better assessments over the years. Decades of psychometric practice in creating these types of tests have ultimately corrected many conflicting issues that were present during the first years that standardized assessments were designed and employed in the public school system. Furthermore, any controversial questions are usually discarded during post analysis and before the performance results are returned to the school districts. Basically, the psychometricians examine and analyze the results. If there is a statistical anomaly evidenced by student responses on specific test questions, those questions are carefully reviewed and may be eliminated in the final scoring process for all test takers.

Let’s begin our discussion...

First, the vast majority of public-school educators, at all levels, know that standardized exams are **grade level tests**. **They do!** Over a three-decade career, I can count on two hands the number of educators – both teachers and administrators – that did **not** believe standardized assessments were grade level tests. However, when students perform poorly on the assessments, no educator wants to blame themselves. It is human nature. Thus, many educators publicly blame the assessment itself, and they do not introspectively reflect and assess accountability to the ineffective methodology employed in preparing students with grade level content – as well as the lack of structured and systematic means that campus and/or school district administrators used in directly addressing students’ academic numeracy and literacy gaps.

It is important that parents, school-board trustees, legislators and newspaper reporters understand the scope of a standardized test. A standardized assessment’s primary function is evaluating students’ current grade level academic ability via reading comprehension, writing, and problem-solving application in literacy, math and science. The teacher uses the state standards (CCSS or TEKS, for instance) to guide them on the grade level expectations for their students. All elementary and middle school state standards regardless of

the ones used in a particular state in this country are basically the same. For example, there is not much variation in CCSS or TEKS (Texas) in math or literacy. Consequently, the concern is not with the state standards. *The issue is **not** properly preparing students for the expected content rigor and format of a standardized assessment – as teachers would prepare their students for any two-to-three-week curricular unit that they employ in their classroom instruction during the school year.*



However, with an assessment on a short curricular unit, a classroom teacher is usually better prepared to teach specific content relative to the summative assessment, since they can preview the final assessment students will be taking at the end of the unit or a short cycle test period. Another issue that must be discussed is the way that a short curricular unit is scored or graded. It can be, and usually is, highly subjective. Classroom teachers, on the same grade level, at the same school, score it differently – including retakes and extra credit to students that do not

academically perform well on that summative assessment. It is difficult to measure how much students really know in this type of accountability scoring system. The ever-present issue of grade inflation will always be a concern in these types of classroom units and their related assessments. It is for these reasons that it is imperative that campus educators study released standardized test questions to determine the means that state standards are assessed. In doing so, teachers and administrators can employ and press more student accountability in the daily lessons to ensure students are prepared for the **format and rigor** of an upcoming standardized assessment. In summary, the most difficult issue for the classroom teacher is that they do not control the elements on a standardized exam as they can and do their own unit test, and that they can subjectively change or grade in any manner of their choosing. In comparison to a standardized assessment, a parent, school administrator and the public at large know how well students understand the content to a preset standard of mastery.

The larger benefit of standardized testing provides external **objective** data to compare school types across the state. Moreover, it indicates that students in low-income schools are objectively and academically behind their more affluent peers. In short, the ‘achievement gap’ indicates a red flag in the approach that public school educators employ in Title 1 schools. In effect, this 60-year difference in academic performance can be summarized with astronaut’s Jim Swigert verbal message from the Apollo 13 craft to the engineers at mission control, “*Houston, we have a problem!*” The historical and real-time catastrophe is that Title 1 schools have never improved academically over that time despite yearly practice. Or, more accurately, the mass of low-income schools that continue to use the same, ineffective ideological approach as they have repeatedly done since I was born in the 1960’s.

Currently, in Texas, the legislature is debating changing the current one-time spring standardized examination to scheduling segmented testing on three different dates during the school year. On paper this sounds great, but it presents pragmatic problems for teachers and their planning. Unlike an internal, formative assessment, these examination results will be made public requiring the teacher to prepare students three times during the school year – when students know different levels of mastery of subject content. This process will not only take time, but I also do not believe that there will be better information that will result in the Title 1 campuses. **Why?** Students are academically behind in Title 1 elementary

schools. That last statement is not debated anywhere in the public school system. Effective academic reformation must stress pressing academically struggling students to grade level *during the fall semester*. If there are external and public assessments, they will focus classroom teachers and principals on short-term performance toward these three proctored test dates.

There are other adverse factors that are at play with the three-assessment process. One important factor is the prevailing use of digital testing on standardized tests across the United States. Of course, using a digital testing format makes it easier to grade and statistically review large data sets as well as save costs on paper-pencil administration. But a digital format also requires practice time for students – elementary students – 8-, 9- and 10-year-olds to become familiar and competent with the medium. In the end analysis, I do not believe multiple standardized tests will change educators’ perspective of the process because the problem is not one or two or three standardized tests in a school year. The main issue is that children – mostly impoverished students – are academically behind with prior grade level academic gaps, and the school system ignores any systemic processes that accelerate students back to grade level content. On the other hand, the three-assessment model does remove the autopsy of end of year testing as well as the lack of corrective action when students are assessed at the end of the school year. However, overall, I believe it will make it more difficult for teachers to be effective with their instruction, and student learning will suffer more than it does now. Of course, time will tell if the three-model assessment change is ever enacted, and if it has any real impact on student outcomes.



Second, a mistake that has been made specifically in Texas, as well as other school districts in the country, is to tie the standardized assessment performance to high school graduation or grade promotion. This process sounds feasible if a person is not familiar with daily public school workings. As noted, a standardized assessment, in and of itself, provides critical comparative data between students at a school as well as different schools. It also provides data on differing geographical locations that can be directly compared. In my opinion, this information is sufficient to begin a conversation on instructional practices and curriculum to better the public school system. However, when test results are tied to grade promotion or graduation, medium to high income parents become much more adverse against the use of standardized tests. For all practical purposes, these parents are correct. Honestly, there is very little gained from connecting grade promotion and/or graduation to standardized test performance since struggling academic students are suddenly not performing better due to their intrinsic fear of not being promoted to the next grade. For struggling academic students, the system must inherently change to prevent the current pedagogical and curriculum model that ultimately results in the ‘strong students getting stronger and weaker students becoming weaker.’

In short, objective assessment data indicates there is a problem in equity – both socio-economically and geographically. Those two factors alone provide a tremendous amount of information that can be used at all levels of enacting needed administrator accountability and effective curriculum/instructional changes. Tying performance to grade promotion makes little sense because little to nothing is being gained. The vast majority of students that are not performing well in assessed grade levels are doing their level best to learn and be successful in the classroom. However, when students fail the standardized test, the thought of forcing them to retake a full year at the same grade level using the same poor pedagogical techniques and nonexistent

stop gap programs to rectify their academic gaps not only makes little sense, but it is also punitive to the child.

Third, in the late 1990's and early 2000's, I heard the following statistical statement at a district level meeting: *If students do not pass consecutive standardized tests in reading or math, there is 90 percent probability they will never pass again.* There are two issues worth noting here. In the situation of consecutive failure, the prior skill gaps that are dependent on learning new grade level content most likely make this statement on never passing again, valid today. The other salient point is that a student who is unsuccessful in 3rd and 4th grades is in serious academic straits, and they are still enrolled in elementary school. A child has not reached 5th grade, and statistically speaking, they are (tragically) never passing a grade level standardized test, again?

On the positive side, each state in this country has their statistical data that can prove or disprove this assertion. Moreover, state education agencies have so much performance data at this point that they are far above the minimum student data sample size to confidently compute the actual statistical percentage, if it is not 90 percent. That information should be made public to convey the urgency and need for effective academic reformation of low-income schools.

Fourth, this point was mentioned briefly but is so important that greater depth is required. Standardized tests are objective. All third through fifth graders in elementary schools are sitting for the same assessment at the same time on the same day. It provides a direct comparison of results in all demographics and geographical locations. The problem that is readily apparent is that medium and high socioeconomic students, by and large, perform well on these grade level tests. Low-income students generally do not do nearly as well, and it is not uncommon that over half to seventy percent of students at Title 1 elementary schools do not meet the minimum mark that demonstrates content mastery and understanding. *Why do children classified as at-risk, or on free and reduced lunch, not perform nearly as well on standardized assessments as comparison to their more affluent peers?* This entire document has repeatedly explained the answer to that question. **The worst aspect of the explanation is that it is all unnecessary.** It is not a difficult problem to solve, but it requires small and important changes in the means that Title 1 schools are managed. It also begs that school and district administrators are held accountable for poor performance. If history has shown anything in the public school system, administrators will not employ effective measures to counter the accepted and ineffective ideological and current dogmatic norms of their profession, if there is not a personal and professional cost to them.



Thus, eliminating the standardized testing allows schools – especially with Title 1 populations no accountability at all. There is no objective measure to compare students' performance to a notable objective standard. It allows administrators a free ride – especially in low-income schools. Additionally, since administrators are **not** held accountable now with standardized assessment results when continued low student performance persists, student outcomes would most certainly be worse if there was no public accounting that the present standardized test results provide.

Fifth, if the reading or math test has a time limit, students **must be** fluent readers, or they will not possess the stamina to finish the assessment. They will read too slowly and be exhausted when the majority of grade level students are prepared and capable to complete a literacy test in between 60 to 80 percent of the time

allotted. Unfortunately, if there is not a time limit, the same problem persists. Elementary children are 8, 9, 10 and 11 years old, and although they are developmentally ready for this type of assessment, without reading fluency, their mental CPU is exhausted after reading approximately half the assessment at an erratic or slow reading pace. Usually, mentally exhausted students will resort to guessing on the assessment to finish it.



The same situation is also true in mathematics as it is in literacy – reading. Students without adequate grade level numeracy skills become exhausted and overwhelmed when solving traditional word/story problems. For instance, a typical standardized math problem (i.e., word or story problem) is a series of embedded math fact and math processing skills. If the student does not possess mastery of one or more of the embedded numeracy skills, they cannot solve the problem-solving exercise. Moreover, if the

student does not have their math facts competently memorized with physical meaning understanding, they must compute the product or quotient by a laborious process in lieu of using a typical algorithm – as specified in state standards. Again, time limit or not on the assessment, the mass of students will not possess the stamina to complete the standardized assessment. As previously mentioned, this situation is one of lack of proper preparation by the school’s lead administrator to set up a global system to ensure that students have mastered both grade level and prior grade level dependent numeracy skills. Elementary teachers cannot band together horizontally on a grade level as well as vertically in a Title 1 school and accomplish this task themselves. It takes school leadership to understand it is a priority – a valued priority.

In fact, a standardized math test is a perfect analogy for the need to eliminate prior grade level academic gaps in general via a global schoolwide system. Innumerate students perform poorly on standardized assessments by demonstrating the inability to solve word/story problems since they have not mastered the required embedded numeracy skills; however, the same situation also occurs every day in their classroom on Tier 1 mathematics curricular activities. **Why?** Students’ prior numeracy gaps are the same prerequisite math fact and processing skills regardless if the child is engaged in daily classroom content or a grade level standardized test. The only difference is that when the standardized assessment results are graded and returned to school personnel in late May or June, there is no denying or rationalizing that the student possesses unaddressed numeracy gaps. Since the campus results are public for each grade level, if there is any interest from the school board, the superintendent should be thoroughly questioned, and effective/accountable changes should be pressed, immediately.

Sixth, any event or situation, when there is stress placed on a human being of any age, it will usually result in increased levels of anxiety. I have heard politicians and others opposed to standardized testing use this as a reason not to employ standardized testing. Now, to be sure, this situation can and does exist in the public school system in all manners of daily assessments, assignments that are due or standardized testing. Anxiety usually occurs when educators or parents, or the school (in general), over emphasize the upcoming standardized exam and pressure children needlessly and adversely.

However, in my two decades plus years of working as a teacher and a principal in low-, middle- and high-income campuses, I have only witnessed two cases worthy of note of the close to 6,000 students I observed

taking standardized tests. One situation was due to parents pressuring their child on the over-importance of the test, and the other was a child who placed undue pressure on himself. Oddly, both students were highly achieving academic students, and once I had personal conversations on the overall perspective of the upcoming test, both scored similarly as high as they did on their nine-week grade marks.

It is important to emphasize that the scores on a standardized test should be relatively close to the marks that are made for a 9-week reporting period throughout the school year. If this is not the case, then usually there is something amiss. Either the teacher has been giving a lot of extra credit assignments or retakes on class assessments. As most educators are aware, grade inflation is very common in public schools, and teachers employ it not to hurt students but to make higher grades. However, the downside is that students may not have mastered content to the level indicated by the final mark on their report card. It is for this reason that standardized testing provides a more objective means of directly comparing students' literacy and math abilities.

Another reason for a discrepancy in the 9-week grades and standardized test results is that students were not prepared for the format and/or assessed content of a standardized test. This last issue is a major reason that students may exhibit stress – they are unprepared for rigor of the assessment. And they know it! Educators must know how the state standards (i.e., CCSS, TEKS, etc.) will be assessed. Standards are generally written as a student learning expectation, but the way specific standards are assessed must be known by the teacher. Of course, the principal and teachers must be highly familiar with the format's assessment. Practicing the medium of the format is exceedingly important with elementary and middle school aged children. For example, testing has moved from paper-pencil to a computer-based digital assessment. I disagree with this digital testing of elementary students for a variety of reasons. I feel the test for elementary students should be assessed with paper pencil means since it eliminates the extra effort for the teacher in 'teaching' and training students on the navigation and familiarity of computer test software – one less intensive time step in the preparation process. However, **if** the test is digital, the teacher must prepare students for that setting – adequately prepared in both touch typing and any germane aspect that is specific to the assessment.

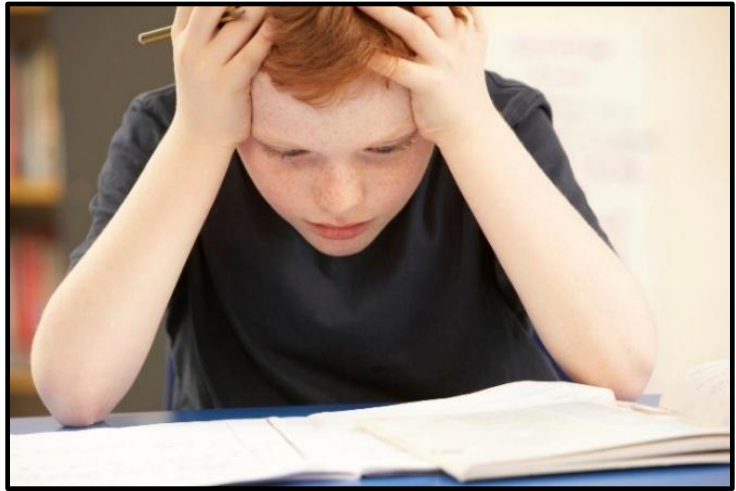
Finally, educators and parents must alleviate their students' and children's stress levels – not amplify it. An assessment will not be a huge issue unless adults make it one. In short, if educators prepare students accordingly with grade level competence including rectifying prior grade level academic gaps, then students of all socioeconomic status will perform equally on a grade level standardized test.

Seventh, '*teaching to the test*' is another slogan bandied about in the public-school sphere that is not well understood by many educators and outsiders alike – as is the fundamental issue (i.e., academic numeracy and literacy gaps) of low achievement in the Title 1 schools. In fact, the two issues are closely related, and by and large, it is a self-inflicted wound of not knowing how to systematically solve academic numeracy and literacy gaps for every student via a global schoolwide program. In fact, I wrote a short blog on 'teaching to the test' at the website address provided in the footer, and after over a thousand views, I have not had a response indicating disagreement.

Let's delve into the validity and meaning of '*teaching to the test.*'

As I noted, academic numeracy and literacy gaps are directly related to the term, 'teaching to the test.' Students' prior academic skills gaps make it more and more difficult for intermediate elementary and middle school classroom teachers to deliver grade level instruction because those Tier 1 skill and application

concepts are dependent on the mastery of prior grade level skills (i.e. academic gaps). For instance, a fifth-grade student learning to add or subtract fractions with unlike denominators (a 5th grade standard) requires mastery of several numeracy skills introduced and taught to mastery during the primary grades. When teachers attempt to provide instruction on a grade level skill with many dependent prior grade math fact and processing skills that students never fully mastered, they have few options. The situation is also a trying one since classroom teachers usually have the highest



professional accountability on academic performance – and not the school or administrator at any level. Consequently, classroom teachers experience the brunt and daily pressure of the seriousness of their students' academic skill gaps. Thus, if sufficiently panicked about their students' external or public performance, teachers often try and teach specific test problems rather than building the laborious effort of filling the dependent academic gaps and fundamental concepts. This instructional technique is attempting to 'teach to the test,' **and it does not work** for the same reason students are struggling in grade level, Tier 1 daily classwork. Students' lack of understanding of the concepts and their dynamics makes it next to impossible for students of all grade levels to correctly answer similar problems when the actual test item is altered in its form. In effect, 'teaching to the test' is destined for failure for a typical classroom of students that are academically behind. However, if attempting to teach to the test is employed – the academic results invariably indicate students are academically behind since the mass of them continue to perform poorly. Consequently, the academic gaps in both literacy and mathematics must be targeted and rectified for each student, so the Tier 1 curriculum can be mastered – and students are aptly prepared for the rigor of a standardized assessment.

It is worth noting that literacy standard strands, such as main idea and inference, are difficult for students to master when they are not sound, fluent readers. These type of deductive questions in reading passages are highly dependent on global comprehension skills. Thus, students that are poor readers can narrow answers down to a couple answers with much practice, but grade level readers rarely have issues with these types of questions and need much less practice to master those specific standards. The same thinking is true in mathematics. Prekindergarten through sixth grade mathematics is arithmetic – a content area that has been around for 5,000 years since the Babylonians. It is basically the four math fact operations with applications via math processing skills. There is no reason that students attending any type of socioeconomic school should struggle with that level of mathematics, other than the elementary school primary grades allowing a numeracy gap to foment. In short, over 90 percent of elementary students can be academically pressed to grade level within one year since mathematics (i.e. arithmetic) is so basic. However, grade level literacy competency will take between a year and two years before students are caught up. ***The key in both literacy and mathematics is third grade proficiency by year's end.*** Children must be at grade level in both subject areas by the end of third grade, so they transition into the last two intermediate grades ON-GRADE LEVEL, and more importantly, into middle school, ON-GRADE LEVEL. However, to accomplish this objective, the principal must employ a global system in Title 1 elementary schools where each student is individually targeted. Fortunately, this intervention process is extremely inexpensive to implement and accomplish quickly – but it is labor intensive the first school year. After that, it is only a maintenance issue school year after school year.

Summary – Standardized Testing

A standardized test question in reading, math or science specifically measures if the student can complete grade level work in accordance with state standards. That is all an assessment is really accomplishing, and that data can be directly compared, objectively, since all students take the assessment on the same day regardless of geography or socioeconomic setting – statewide.

However, if one wants to challenge if a spring standardized assessment **IS** a grade level examination, I am open to what I refer to as the “*Pepsi Challenge of Standardized Assessments.*” On an elementary school reading, math or science examination, let me work with 4 students who scored 20 points apart, starting at 20 percent correct. Thus, one student scored 20 percent correct on the standardized exam, the second scored 40, the third 60, the fourth 80 percent, and the last scored at or close to 100 percent. After working with the four students for 10 to 12 minutes each, I will rank the students from highest to lowest scores or vice versa. One of the major problems with standardized testing is that the results over a large population of students are accurate; thus, it is relatively easy to tell a child’s academic prowess in a very short time period if the educator is experienced.

Concluding Comments and Analysis on all 17 Questions

Hopefully, these 17 questions and their brief responses will initiate more than curiosity into the educational and organizational practices of so many school districts and their low-income schools. School boards and lawmakers must consider the social and academic needs of children over a nonaccountable public school system that does not produce results or improve from one school year to the next. Furthermore, all 17 questions ultimately deal with school administrator accountability, implementation and improving student performance – with student



social and academic outcomes as a central determinant of district and school curricular programming and pedagogy. School boards have one employee that they manage – the superintendent or the charter school founder. As has been stated, repeatedly, school performance is flat school year after school year. Since school boards are existentially complicit in **not** holding traditional school and charter school founders responsible for the chronic academic results, I believe that state legislators will eventually be forced to take bold steps and challenge the century plus years of local educational control. The economic stakes and professional aspirations are too high for low-income children as they mature into adults. As is well known, many of the highest paying jobs and satisfying careers are STEM related, and the mass of our most needy children are woefully unprepared for the opportunities that await them IF they are able to graduate high school.

In general, Title 1 school educators cannot be dogmatic and idealistic in their educational practices and be successful with all their students. Each child matters, and there are pragmatic systems that rapidly accelerate children to grade level – where Tier 1 curriculum functions as it is designed since prior grade level academic numeracy and literacy gaps are eradicated. Title 1 public schools were not improving prior to the COVID pandemic, and surprisingly, they are achieving worse results after the pandemic – to the point that outcomes are worse for children that were too young and were NOT yet enrolled in school during the worldwide medical calamity.

Title 1 school classrooms can be deceiving. To outsiders, they can appear busy places of learning. However, one should not confuse motion with student learning. Those two entities can be two different things, and in most Title 1 elementary schools, they most definitely have opposite effects on student outcomes. Principals must implement systems, specific curricular resources and pedagogical techniques that matter – that augment and champion a significant heightening of academic achievement.



However, if there are doubting Thomases to the situations I described in this essay, the proof to either disprove me or verify my position is a relatively easy experiment. Simply ask your school board representative to go along with several lawmakers and visit several Title 1 elementary schools in their school district. Once at school, visit ALL the classrooms on a grade level (i.e., third, fourth or fifth grade). The visitors (not the school educators) randomly select approximately 20 children, and each visitor listens to a student read a vetted grade level novel aloud for 5 minutes. Then, ask the children comprehension questions, so the student can explain what they read.

(Note: I also recommend that the visitors bring the specific novels with them to the school.) Conduct the same process with a couple grade level problem-solving exercises in mathematics. The grade level resources can be downloaded for free on the website in the footer of this document. After the Title 1 school visit, the group should visit a medium to a high socioeconomic elementary school in the same district within a week. Repeat the process with the same grade level at that campus as was done at the Title 1 elementary school.

Then, compare the results during a debrief. If the school board trustee that attended the school visits has difficulty explaining or they are embarrassed with these varied results between the two elementary school settings, it is time to contemplate accountable next steps and/or legislative action to seriously limit local control. Authority and responsibility are earned – and most local school boards are not earning that oversight privilege by allowing administrators to openly deceive them each school year with the promise that the academic improvement will be forthcoming. The state legislature and school board trustees' first responsibility is to the children – all the children attending their state's or district's schools.

Between half to 70 percent of the students in a typical urban district are being openly cheated of an equal educational opportunity the minute they enroll in a Title 1 elementary school. It is time for the state legislature to step up to the plate. One solution is empowering the state's education commissioner with the power to appoint and remove school board members. Of course, this action is dramatic, but impoverished children deserve better – much better. I am sure there are alternative solutions to reduce local control of school districts. *In short, school and district administrators are NOT learning any lessons from lack of improvement since the school board trustees do not hold them accountable.* Whatever the solution, sole local power over the schools must be reined in or fully expect the low academic outcomes to continue unabated in American Title 1 public schools for long into the future.

This writing can easily be dismissed as negative. My rebuttal to that reaction is: billions of dollars are invested each year in the public school system, and the Title 1 performance does not improve. That fact – practice **without** improvement is unique in human experience and task analysis. Correcting low student achievement is not difficult – or it should not be since it is not that complicated in design, especially in Title 1 elementary schools. I believe the major concern I have as an educator is that the continued failure in the low-income schools is a lack of understanding of basic learning principles – human learning processes. How administrators

cannot recognize that the prerequisite skills flow into application is unsettling. The only issue is the global design of stop-gap literacy and numeracy systems to make the process viable for any Tier 1 curriculum and campus enrollment size. That problem was solved almost 2 decades ago, but maybe it is the effort that is required that administrators are not willing to do. I believe it is due to a combination of ignorance, no accountability, dogmatic ideology, and/or philosophical beliefs. However, I do know that the public education system employs neither blueprint copying nor idea diffusion (i.e. aware that a process works, so the innovation is investigated and independently pursued) to better curricular or pedagogical practices. However, until there are changes in the antiquated local control model of school districts, it has proven that the academic reform of low-income schools must be impossible. That accountability process initiated by the school boards is and will always be the starting point of global academic reformation in a traditional or charter public school system.

Importantly, the academic gaps must be corrected via a **global and general** method, so that the currently available pool of hireable teaching personnel is highly successful in a typical Title 1 classroom. The process of hiring the most effective teachers and stocking them in a typical challenging Title 1 elementary school is a specialized solution and will not be broadly effective. That method cannot be replicated across the country's tens of thousands of Title 1 elementary and middle schools, but a process that utilizes the current teaching staff at any Title 1 elementary school would be. Again, the process is both inexpensive and was perfected almost two decades ago, so it is only a matter of implementation, consistency and dedication by school and district administrators.