

Teacher Burnout – How to Stop It!

By Blaine Helwig



Professional frustration occurs in every job to varying degrees; however, I have never experienced the same levels of isolated frustration as I did during my teaching career in the public school system. For starters, I was a late entry into classroom teaching; in fact, I was nearly in my mid-thirties when I left finance and engineering to become an elementary classroom teacher.

During my first two years as a fifth-grade teacher, it seemed ‘normal’ to me that a high percentage of students entered my classroom each August **without** fundamental mastery of basic math fact operations, previous grade level math processing skills, as well as issues in reading proficiency and comprehension, developmental grammatical competency, and an inability to correctly spell the most common English words. At that time, I did not question it. I was so overwhelmed with the many tasks of a typical classroom that it did NOT occur to me that students are required, by state standards, to master that very content at prior grade levels for good reason.

In response to my students’ skill deficiencies, I quickly incorporated parallel remediation programs to my daily core lessons to rectify students’ codependent and prerequisite academic skill gaps – in addition to the fifth-grade standards that I was required to teach each school year. The workload in added lesson planning and preparation included creating an organized and sequential warm-up system in both math and reading. It was exhausting for me, but the students were excited about learning the content – which was extremely gratifying.

By the end of my third year in the classroom, I was weary and frustrated. Upon reflection, I questioned the obvious, *“Why were so many students that had been continuously enrolled at the campus since the primary grades entering my classroom every school year with the same academic literacy and numeracy skill gaps?”* On a fact-finding mission, I approached both the third and fourth grade classroom teachers, but they were unresponsive to my plight and constructive criticism. The elusive-obvious argument was more than apparent. *If in fifth grade, I was able to rectify students’ prior grade level skill gaps as specified by State standards to mastery concurrently with required fifth grade skills, then why were these same skill gaps not mastered at earlier grade levels?*

When my conversations stalled with my colleagues, I turned my attention to the campus principal – our instructional leader and direct supervisor. Much to my chagrin and surprise, she agreed with the grade level teachers below me. The principal felt that her teachers’ work was sufficient, and that they were doing all they could both socially and academically. My rebuttal was straightforward: These unmastered academic skills directly impact students’ social awareness and self-esteem. The two attributes – academic prowess/proficiency and self-esteem were symbiotically interconnected. However, the principal was firm in her educational philosophy and instructional leadership at the school. At that point, I had no other recourse – the conversation died there.

Realistically, at that time in my teaching career, I had ONLY three years of classroom experience. I was still considered an entry-level teacher. Additionally, I believed my arguments fell on deaf ears since teachers’ and administrators’ educational philosophies are subjective. In many cases, an educator’s philosophy toward student learning provides a general emotive set of beliefs that may be independent of the reality associated with academic student outcomes on spring standardized assessments. In effect, it affords an educator a personal and professional rationalization or an “out” with regard to associated accountability on low student performance.

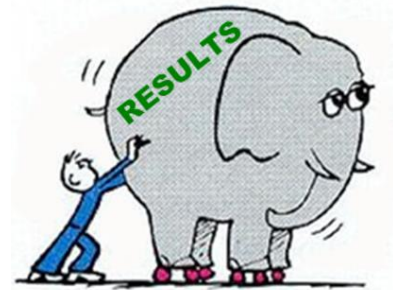


Setting aside my disappointment, I continued working at the same campus for three more years despite the repeated effort of prior grade level remediation work with my students. In my perspective, I likened my public-school yearly remediation work to a *modern-day* Sisyphus – the mythological King of Corinth eternally punished in Hades to repeatedly roll a heavy rock up a hill only to have the rock roll back down the hill as it neared the top. Analogously, each August, I would press incoming fifth-grade students to master their **prior** grade level numeracy and literacy skill gaps while simultaneously teaching the required fifth-grade level academic standards until the ‘top’ of May. Then, as August and a new school year arrived, the same burden and toil began anew as the metaphoric rock awaited at the base of the hill as incoming fifth grade students entered my classroom.

At the end of year six, my professional frustration and burnout were at an apex. It was confounding. If simple adjustments were systematically implemented, this annual remediation fiasco could easily be eradicated. Unfortunately, it was evident that year seven would be no different than any of the other previous six years. I quit the classroom and returned to structural engineering work. That occupation freed my evenings, so I was able to enroll in a graduate program for educational administration – and become a campus principal. I felt it was my only pragmatic option. I was of the mind that I needed to be the campus instructional leader with the authority to change ineffective pedagogy practices that affected skill and problem-solving mastery. I also needed to implement curricular resources that eliminated the prior grade level academic literacy and numeracy gaps that inevitably and adversely impacted students and teachers in the upper intermediate grades. Otherwise, the Tier 1 curriculum would never work as it was designed. All Tier 1 curriculum, at all education levels from elementary school to university, assumes that students do NOT possess co-dependent prior grade level academic skill gaps that negatively influence their current grade level learning. But students **DO** have academic gaps – especially at Title 1 campuses, and they must be dealt with for the core daily lessons to be effective!

Title 1 Elementary Teacher Burnout – The General Sisyphus Experience

As a Title 1 principal predominately recruiting teachers with one-to-three-years of experience to my campus, I discovered that many entry-level teachers experienced the same frustrations I had when I was a classroom educator. However, I also learned that they did not implement the same remediation interventions as I had to achieve heightened student outcomes. At first, this situation may seem odd; but in public education, whether intentional or not, most novice Title 1 educators are placed in a ‘sink or swim’ classroom situation. Entry-level teachers are usually young – 22 to 24 years old – hired and dumped in the classroom and left to ‘figure it out.’ The majority of teachers I recruited had a school principal like mine – a garden variety physical plant manager that did not support them with high maintenance disciplinary issues. These principals also assigned teachers ineffective student monitoring tasks that required hours of analyzing student data that had **NO** effect remediating students’ prior grade level academic literacy and numeracy gaps.



The result? Teachers expended their planning time and worked after school through-out the school year and all their efforts produced little to no achievement gains by late May. As expected, frustration ensued, for in pragmatic reality, their metaphoric Sisyphus Rock rested at the bottom of the hill in August and remained there for nine months despite furiously pushing on the boulder the entirety of the school year. ***There is little more disheartening and defeating to a human being, than engaging sustained and consistent exertion for a prolonged period of time and realizing little to no results.***

The high level of frustration, after teaching in chronically low academic performing Title 1 elementary campuses, generally manifests itself into one of three possibilities. **One**, teachers view the situation as hopeless and not for them. They went into teaching to help children succeed in school, and they encountered several roadblocks. Consequently, they quit the teaching profession after three to five years, never to return. **Two**, they attempt to transfer into a medium or high socioeconomic (non-Title 1) elementary school where students do not possess the same prior grade level academic literacy and numeracy gaps in comparison to a typical Title 1 elementary campus. Or, **three**, they resign themselves that Title 1 campuses cannot be academically ‘fixed,’ and high student failure rates are inevitable. Consequently, they remain at the campus and become part of the day-to-day routines – neither passionate or driven – simply acquiescing to mediocrity.

Reasons for My Success in Student Remediation Without Administration Support



In retrospect, after becoming a Title 1 elementary principal, I discovered the specific reasons why my classroom experience was different in successfully remediating student academic gaps where others could not. Basically, I had four (4) advantages in my classroom teaching experience that most entry-level teachers did not necessarily possess – with all other things being equal.

- **First**, I was older by 10 to 13 years than most entry-level classroom Title 1 teachers, and this age difference afforded me a mature perspective of professional work and accountability that can only be gained with time. I also benefitted greatly from my prior decade of work in professional fields where interpreting data and heightening performance were valued commodities. In engineering and finance, problems negatively affecting outcomes were isolated and resolved; they were not allowed to linger year-after-year. Unfortunately, as entry-level educators learn quickly, campus and district administrators’ general mindset toward chronic student performance is rarely to isolate the problem’s pertinent components by applying an executive function methodology and analytically address the fundamental issues. Instead, they essentially regroup during the summer hiatus and rinse and repeat by implementing the same ideological approach under a different program name, or they continue implementing a curricular program and/or methodology that has not demonstrated student success for a decade. They sell the new plan to their school board trustees, and the non-performance cycle begins anew for the upcoming school year.
- **Second**, my first university degree was in civil engineering; hence, my content strength was mathematics and science. I was immediately aware of the importance of both numeracy mechanics and codependent skill mastery. Consequently, student problem solving in conjunction with skill deficiencies remediation was addressed in my first year as a classroom teacher. Moreover, it afforded a colleague and I to primarily focus on literacy instruction and rectify our students’ reading and writing deficiencies. Lastly, my civil engineering professors incorporated dynamic ‘spaced repetition’ instruction in their daily pedagogy. Knowing the effectiveness of that instructional technique, I implemented a developmental spaced repetition pedagogical approach to ensure my students were provided sufficient daily practice to achieve threshold mastery levels of both prior grade and fifth grade level numeracy skills.
- **Third**, my prior military experience was valuable in understanding and fomenting trustful relationships within the group dynamics endemic in a typical school classroom. It afforded critical expertise in layering a foundation for equitable classroom management, and creating highly organized efficient daily routines that preserved instructional minutes. This process dramatically heightened time-on-task student behavior.
- **Lastly**, my campus administrators were hands-off, physical plant managers when I was a classroom teacher. Of course, that was detrimental to the overall instruction and curricular resource

implementation across the campus; however, that lackadaisical management style afforded each teacher carte blanche to create supplemental curricular systems that if designed and implemented well, could be highly effective in meeting students' academic needs. Unfortunately, in the long-run, this supervision style inevitably created 'islands of academic excellence' in certain classrooms while simultaneously aiding in teacher frustration and burnout in those same classrooms with repetitive workloads each school year. On the positive side, the experience provided the working knowledge that effective instructional and curricular systems could rapidly close students' academic numeracy and literacy gaps. As a Title 1 principal, I only needed to expand that thinking campus-wide to replicate my classroom results to my Title 1 elementary campus. My teaching experience afforded a crystal-clear reality as an administrator: ***Impactful, sustained academic change at a campus does NOT occur by chance; it must occur via a systematic, replicable process.***



Main Takeaway



Success in any human endeavor is an outcome of a few critical attributes – education, expertise, know-how, effort, tenacity, luck and timing. However, after all those elements are generally considered, there is usually at least one to two main points that can be derived out of the work process. The same is true here. Thus, there is one main takeaway that the reader should walk away with after reading this relatively short composition that focuses on teacher burnout in the public school system.

The one important conclusion that is unavoidably clear – ***If the students' academic literacy and numeracy gaps are not rapidly eradicated, students will not 'catch-up' over time.*** Those academic gaps are NOT going away on their own, and they must be directly addressed, systematically for **each** student. Once those academic gaps are systematically filled, teachers of all experience levels can be successful engaging students with the Tier 1 curriculum and application – since students are ON GRADE LEVEL. Finally, and of paramount importance, it is not only students that become frustrated in the classroom when they are academically behind, teachers become disenfranchised as well – leading many to leave public school teaching permanently – burned out by the lack of their students' academic progress after investing so much time and effort.

So, the academic ball is in your court – campus and district administrators. These two groups of administrators must ask themselves the following question to avoid a repeat of last school year's academic performance, ***“What needs to change at your Title 1 elementary campuses this upcoming school year that directly closes the academic gaps positively affecting both students and teachers?”***

If you do not know the answer, that is fine. We do! Thankfully, it doesn't cost money; it is all about methodology. Check out our website address provided in the footer to discover the steps to dramatically raise student academics.