

INSIDE EDUCATION

Part 1 of 6—The Reading Rat Race Series

Madison's Literacy Task Force: Reading Renaissance or Recycling?

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Before looking at the Madison disastrous reading problem, some reading background will be helpful to put it into an historical perspective to fully understand the problems and issues involved that are also national in scope. What's important to note is that it's not true of all students; the reading pandemic is a boy problem and particularly boys of color. Furthermore, reading is a long standing problem that has not been solved despite more research, dollars, and staffing.

Madison started to seriously look at its reading problem in the late 1990's. What was known at that time about reading? A good place to start is with the testing data in 1998:

The NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) is considered the nation's report card because it is a standardized and used nationally by school districts. Reading scores revealed that nationally 38% of 4th graders (41% male, 35% female), 26% of 8th graders (32% male, 19% female), and 23% of 12th graders (30% male, 17% female) scored "below basic" skills. ***"At all grades and for all levels, the reading performance of female students exceeded that of their male peers."*** Obviously, gender is an absolutely critical factor in examining test data and resolving the reading pandemic; boys, like it or not, learn differently than girls. In fact, the average score for male 12th graders was lower than that in 1992; so boys are regressing rather than progressing. The alarm bells are ringing, but it doesn't seem like anyone is listening!

One interesting outcome was a Chicago Tribune article, ***Schools Pay New Attention to Boys***, "... ***many educators are reaching the same conclusion: boys are in crisis in America's classrooms. Educators know that boys account for the overwhelming majority of behavior problems, dominate special education (primarily because of reading problems), and increasing numbers are on medication.***"

When ethnic groups are compared, it reveals a far more alarming picture of reading performance across Education America. For example, in 8th grade, 18% of Whites, 18% of Asians, 39% of American Indians, 46% of Hispanics, and 47% of Blacks scored "below basic." If "basic level" is included, just under 90% of minorities did not achieve at "proficient level" skills. Isn't it logical to conclude that minorities are programmed for academic failure? True, but not quite right. 47% of blacks include boys and girls, but girls outscore boys. Braking this score down will reveal far more failures among boys than girls. How much longer can society afford to tolerate such disparity in reading achievement?

So any reading debate without regard to gender or ethnicity is really insane and mindless to put it in the bluntest possible terms. It simply does not address reality; but, more importantly, it is masking—not solving—the real problems.

Make no mistake about it, this is discrimination at its worst! How can the quest for equality be achieved when the results are dramatically unequal? Isn't being trapped in the "bondage of illiteracy" the most intolerable and vicious form of discrimination?

IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER TOO IS THAT, ACCORDING TO THE RESEARCH, THE ABILITY (TO LEARN READING) IS NOT DEPENDENT ON INTELLIGENCE OR PARENT EDUCATION.

However, how many educators and policymakers really believe the research? There is yet another problem which is that teachers are not really conscious of the gender and ethnic issues nor are they trained adequately to provide remedial reading instruction in the regular K-12 classrooms. Of course, there are reading specialists, but not enough—nor will there ever be—to provide the needed remediation. Therefore, like it or not, the regular classroom teachers at all grade levels must take on far more responsibility for recognizing and remediating reading problems; but, it's not happening.

However, the need for teacher training is being recognized. *The Reading Excellence Act*, 1998 provides \$210 million dollars for professional development as a way to improve reading skills and abilities. Did Madison participate in this funding? If not, why not. If yes, apparently it had not impact.

Important to realize is that unless training is substantial and ongoing, particularly with respect to ethnic groups and boys, such training will not produce the desired results. In addition, and most important, training must translate into application and practice in the classroom. Finally, there must be effective supervision and monitoring—not just an occasional teacher evaluation observation like every 3 years in Madison—to insure that the training is, in fact, reinforced in the classroom.

Another important issue not addressed vigorously enough is that many, if not most, of the reading problems can be prevented through early intervention. Part of the research by the **National Institute of Child Health** centered on an analysis of the bottom 20% with serious reading difficulties. Their conclusion was *“that this group lacked phonetic skills, and that identification, diagnosis and intervention must occur early (prior to grade 3) to be most effective.”* What did Madison do to address this research?

In other words, all of the above information and more was available when Madison started on a quest to improve reading in 1998 by establishing a Citizens Advisory group to study the reading problem. The thorny question to ask is was this information used in its quest to solve the problem? If not, why not! Citizen groups sound nice, very democratic, but what do they really know and understand about the problem? Were they given advice for what needed to be done and advice for how to do it?

Madison is typical of a large district city school system that has had an historical reading problem to deal with; and in fact, it's so bad that Madison has the highest racial achievement gap in the U.S. confirmed by the 2018 NAEP; the results revealed the following: While 63% of white 4th graders scored advanced or proficient in English Language Arts, only 14% of black students did so. In 8th grade, 46% of whites scored at those level compared to only 4% for blacks.

The Superintendent stated that *“Closing these gaps is not only the right thing to do, it is imperative for our state... At MMSD, it is critical that we support the work of district staff to implement a new reading curriculum and continue the work of crucial reading interventions at all grade levels,”* [well said]

“Much is known about the process of learning to read, but a huge gap is between that knowledge and what is practiced in our schools. The Madison School District needs a science-based literacy curriculum overseen by licensed reading professionals who understand the cognitive processes that underlie learning how to read.”

The problem is explained in *“Madison’s long term, disastrous reading results: status quo tends to be very entrenched.”* (Scott Girard), *Schoolinfosystems*, 12/16/2020. *As a result, MMSD “Announces a 14 member early literacy task force focused on analyzing approaches to teaching reading and reducing achievement gaps.”* Is this an attempt for a reading renaissance or simply recycling the past effort?

Noteworthy is that the School Board adopted an important reading goal in 1998:

*“That all students complete the 3rd grade able to read at or beyond grade level. We adopted this goal in response to recommendations from a **citizen study group** that believed minority students who are not competent as readers by the end of the third grade fall behind in all academic areas after third grade.*

Note: A search of the Internet, the School website, and local newspapers did not reveal any information about this study group so there is no way to determine what their report included other than what was reported in this quote.

‘All students’ meant ‘all’ students. We promised to stop thinking in terms of average student achievement in reading. Instead, we would separately analyze the reading ability of students by subgroups. The subgroups included white, African American, Hispanic, Southeast Asian, and other Asian students.”

[Asians are usually not counted as minority because they outscore every other group].

The rhetoric is always profound, powerful and enticing to believe. Apparently, it did not happen in the past 20 years despite all of the critical information available. The reading problem was identified and acted upon by the *Citizens Advisory Group*, obviously without success so it's back to "square one" with another such group. Why? Since the reading debacle relating to minority students continues, it also means that no one has been held accountable for failing to successfully implement the School Board reading goals; in fact, even the State's reading requirements of 2011. Therefore, why should anyone believe that anything will change with another study group?

Unfortunately, this is what typically happens in other districts with the ongoing reading rat race (and other school problems) to make it look like an effort is being made to correct a long standing problem in order to address and placate those who voice concerns. It's known as "kicking the can down the road" (a delaying action for others to deal with in the future.)

It's a perfect example that despite reams of rhetoric and often limp actions about any educational problem over many years, nothing changes as will be seen in this 6 Part *Reading Rat Race Series*.

However, "reading" is a very broad term covering a host of issues and problems; it's like using the term "car" which by itself means little since there are so many different manufacturers, models and accessories. Furthermore, with so many parts, there is potential for hundreds of problems to occur. Despite constant improvements over many years, millions of cars yearly are recalled because of defects. Yet, there is no shortage of funds or talent from all manufacturer's to produce the most reliable cars indicating that money and talent doesn't always produce the desired results. With car recalls, it usually is a problem with a particular part, but how did that part get through quality control? It's the result of human failure to properly test the parts supplied by hundreds of different suppliers. In other words, the engineers designed the car correctly, but at the implementation stage of putting the parts together, failure occurred and continues to do so year after year—poor quality control by human hands and minds.

The reading problem is somewhat similar with the goals and strategy that are on target, but implementation falters. So when reading results are called "disastrous," what exactly does it mean and what are the factors (different parts) involved that produces a reading pandemic?

To begin with, WI only requires one elementary reading course for teacher certification, *The Foundations of Reading* passed in 2014 and, more important, teachers must pass a test based that knowledge. Well, sort of [in education, there are few, if any, *absolutes*]. This is true especially when the intended results do not materialize. With just this one issue, when too many teachers, mostly minority failed the test, thousands of "Mulligans" (free pass in golf language) were given to those who failed to become certified. It's explained in "***My Question to Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers On Teachers Mulligans and our Disastrous Reading Results***, (Jim Zellmer), *Schoolinfosystems*, 09/ 25/2019.

A reason given for the *Mulligans* was that the test was *biased* [Yep, there is always an excuse; too often easy to say, but usually harder to prove]. "*Bias is an irrational assumption or belief that warps the ability to make a decision based on facts and evidence.*" The only evidence was that a "*disproportionate number of people of color were not passing.*" The implication is that the test questions were so worded to make it difficult for minorities to pass the test. What has to be proven is that those who were responsible for developing the test questions purposefully and knowingly decided as a group how to word the questions so minorities would fail to provide the correct answers; it's almost impossible to do. In addition, each question must be analyzed objectively to determine the bias involved. Was this done? Obviously, it was not! Until it is done, *bias* cannot be the culprit; the blame rests with the test takers, mostly minority, who did not know the correct answers. Of course, it could also have been poor instruction; again, not plausible because most white and even some minorities passed the test.

Furthermore, it would mean that the content of the course itself was also biased; in other words, the *Foundations of Reading* course content that certainly must have involved reading strategies and techniques to understand how to teach reading was also biased. How is that possible? It would be like saying the part that caused a car recall was biased. Important to note was the reason itself stating that *a disproportionate number of minorities failed* meaning that some proportionate numbers of minorities did, in fact, pass. If the questions were so biased, how did they manage to pass? It also means that the reading curriculum was successful with white students more-so than with black students. Here I may stretch a point, but my guess is they had reading deficits to start with.

Is the reading curriculum at fault or was it the instructional strategies and techniques that failed black students? Therefore, what needs to change, the curriculum or the instruction for blacks? All students do not learn from any single curriculum or instructional strategy or technique and that is why curriculum and instruction must adapt when necessary to meet the needs of those who did not learn particularly when a large group of students are involved. When it gets down to individual students, that is when special education laws take over and IEP's (Individual Education Plans) are developed for each one.

However, there is still another part of this problem that is absolutely critical and goes unrecognized (it's the reason I have just finished a book, *The Boys' Academic Pandemic: Can't Read, Can't Learn!* (to be published in the first half of 2021). What will be found by analyzing the NAEP results is that black girls score higher than black boys taking the same test (a test that has also been called *biased*), who come from the same socio-economic conditions as the boys, yet these conditions are typically cited as the reasons why minorities score much lower than whites. Again, it is NOT all "minorities" or even "all" boys. In fact, the same tests reveals that white girls score higher than white boys; therefore, the claim should be that the test is biased against white boys.

Whether anyone likes it or not, boys are different than girls and they develop intellectually up to 2 years later than girls in the early formative years of schooling. They, like the black boys, also need a different instructional approach. This has been proven true because of successful reading results in the handful of schools that are for boys only. All students are very capable of learning if the correct instructional strategies are used along with what is known as the *science of reading* components in which phonics plays the primary role.

Furthermore, minority students in charter schools, as a group, outscore their public school counterparts because the charters are free from most public school regulations and requirements. Black parents (mostly mothers) love charter schools because black children score higher than those who are trapped and held in bondage in failing public schools with few option to drop out and go elsewhere. The fact is that black students do better in suburban, mostly white, schools. Again, an indication that they can learn in the right educational environment; that was the prime reason schools were desegregated (although now segregation is basically the same after costly and time consuming busing efforts to mix schools).

So essentially, the part that is responsible for boy failures requires a recall of the instruction, not necessarily the reading curriculum—it too may have a significant role in the failure rate if it does not follow research evidence.

National Reading Panel 2000

Needless to say, reading problems are a national concern and, as a result, in 1997, Congress asked the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) to convene a national panel to assess the status of research-based knowledge, including the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching children to read. This panel was charged with providing a report that "*should present its conclusions, an indication of the readiness for application in the classroom of the results of this research, and, if appropriate, a strategy for rapidly disseminating this information to facilitate effective reading instruction in the schools. If found warranted, the panel should also recommend a plan for additional research regarding early reading development and instruction.*"

It sounds like a charge for the Literacy Task Force. To put it bluntly, there is really nothing new to learn that will make any significant difference. The fact is that most articles, reports and studies simply rehash what is already known.

This report was available at the time of the *Citizens Advisory Group* study, but whether they referenced it is difficult to determine since efforts to find its report have been unsuccessful. As far as the National Panel goes, it is an excellent report that answers many questions and issues ripe for study by the new task force (below), as well as, implementation strategies.

However, it did not discuss or mention the problem with boys and that's why there is now a national schooling problem with boys such that some books have been written about it that can be encapsulated as "*The War Against Boys.*" How they could have missed such an obvious problem when they had a panel of so-called experts is beyond comprehension because all test results indicated that they were scoring much lower

than girls in reading (English Language Arts); the boys score higher in math because it requires less reading skills.

The Madison Literacy Task Force (LTF)

Responding to the reading debacle and the arrival of a new superintendent, the school board has established the LTF that is charged to “*investigate the best practices for teaching literacy.*”

This may sound too simplistic, but this information is already known and reported in an avalanche of articles, studies and reports all with free access. All the LTF can do is to analyze why all previous reforms failed especially when efforts were made at the State, school board, and district levels over the past 20 years; and getting answers to the question that will follow will certainly help.

I assume that the *1998 Citizen Advisory Group* had a similar charge and made recommendations that obviously were unsuccessful. Each member of the LTF should be required to read the 1998 citizens advisory group report (if it can be found) to determine their findings and recommendations, as well as, the National panel’s report and digest it’s wealth of information; in addition, there have been other studies, reports and articles since then that have addressed the reading problem (reading has been the most studied topic in education with a reported 100,000 articles, reports and studies).

What the new LTF will find is that state requirements for teacher certification is “loosey—goosey” in practice because when too many fail the required reading test (providing they meet some other questionable requirements), they still get certified. So essentially, *Mulligan* teachers (who failed the test) are teaching reading. So how effective can these teachers be in teaching the required reading skills and knowledge to students? That should be the central tissue for the task force to determine and analyze, but it’s doubtful that this will be done and the reason should be obvious.

Since it may not be able to change state requirements, Madison can insist on better reading backgrounds when they hire new teachers; but unfortunately, in doing so, it will restrict the number of minority teacher candidates from applying. This issue can be readily solved, with a partnership with the University of Wisconsin, Madison, to provide an intensive summer program in the science of reading for applicants who do not have a strong reading background. Those who pass a test based on the reading content presented, can then be hired for one year providing they continue undergoing reading professional development activities during the year developed by Madison. Passing another test based on the professional development content would make those temporary teachers retained permanently after completion of the first year. There will likely be failures, but there is no reason why they could not repeat the conditional program again.

Requiring only one reading course is a real failure on the part of WI to adequately certify teachers (simply compare this requirement to that of CT (it was crowned the reading champ and will be discussed in more detail as part of this reading series;) and other states to see the differences, as well as, appropriate reading actions by the State Departments of Education to enhance reading success for all.

If the task force is to succeed, there are critical questions that must be asked and, of course, answered honestly. Some of them are illustrated below for consideration:

The LTF Questions

Students

1. What is the objective standard or requirement for a students to be considered a reading failure?
2. Are reading failures identified by gender, age, race and classroom teacher?
3. Are reading failures passed on to the next grade without being remediated?
4. Are the girls scoring better than the boys (most likely)? If so, successful reading instruction took place for them indicating a change is needed in instructional strategies for boys and possibly curricular changes if the science of reading is not being used which it is not being done as yet.
5. How do minority girls compare to minority boys in terms of reading scores and other school outcomes? Most likely minority girls are doing better than boys. If so, it dispels the notion that socio-economic conditions as being reasons why boys are failing since many boys come from the same households as girls.
6. How many are homeless?

7. How many students who graduated were reading failures, and failed to meet graduation standards (providing the standards have not been lowered or ignored). Interestingly, California legislated that any student who fails graduation requirements can still pass to make graduation rates shine?
 8. In analyzing test data of failing students, exactly which areas of reading did they falter?
 9. In those classes that have high failure rates, what is the percentage of special education students?
 10. In those classes with high failure rates, which have had high disciplinary referrals?
 11. In which classrooms and schools are most of the student reading failures found? Most likely they come from failing schools which are typically found in the cities, as well as, classrooms with ineffective teachers (probably with less credentials and experience). The issue then is why are failing schools and ineffective teachers allowed to exist?
 12. In which subjects, if any, have reading failures found success? Was it the teacher, the subject matter (including extra-curricular activities) or both?
 13. Of students who dropped out of school, what percentage were reading failures?
 14. Of the failing students, how many are from dysfunctional families and in particular single parent homes?
 15. Were they behind grade level in reading skills by the end of 3rd grade? If so, what was done at that time or before to address their deficits?
 16. What are the academic, psychological, retention, dropout, and incarceration consequences, short term and long term, if reading deficits are not remediated in a timely manner (no later than grade 3)?
 17. Is there a school to prison pipeline that begins after grade 3 and continues until students drop out (usually around grade 9). It is easy to determine by obtaining data from the prison system as to how many of those incarcerated were dropouts (ranges from two-thirds to 80%)?
 18. What percentage of incarcerated youth from Madison were deficient in reading skills at the time of being incarcerated?
 19. What evidence exists to determine whether the reading failures were and are intellectually deficient (I.Q. tests, other standardized achievement tests, etc.)?
 20. What is the absence rate of failing students?
 21. Are there realistic and ample space options for students to leave failing schools? If not, why not?
 22. What remediation strategies and techniques have been used to alleviate the reading deficits? Which is most effective and by which teachers?
 23. At what grade levels were they used?
- Teachers:**
24. Is there a classification for an “*effective teacher*” (or similar classification? If not, why not? (This will be discussed in more detail further on).
 25. In the classrooms that had high percentages of reading failures, how many of the teachers were given “Mulligans?”
 26. Who are the successful teachers, by race, gender, degree level, and years of experience and how do these differences compare to non-successful teachers?
 27. If there are teachers who are evaluated as being ineffective (not very likely even if they are), what support is given for them to improve?
 28. Do the unsuccessful teachers exhibit signs of stress or other mental health problems? If so, how have the mental health issues been addressed, if at all?
 29. What type of mental health issues are found in those teachers with high reading failures?
 30. What reading training have successful training had compared to non-successful teachers?
 31. Which teachers, if any, had little or no reading failures? How is this explained?
 32. What kind of teacher evaluations are required every 3 years (two thirds of the states no longer require evaluations)? This is a key factor because extremely high percentages of evaluations show teachers as being effective even when significant numbers of the students are not succeeding academically. Therefore, considering the disastrous reading results, there should be a high percentage of teachers who fail their evaluation.
 33. Are there any consequences for evaluators who give teachers *effective* or *satisfactory* ratings when they have a high percentage of reading failures in their classrooms that cannot be explained by mitigating factors such as having a high percentage of special education students, gang influences, etc.?
 34. If there are no consequences, what is the need or benefit of teacher evaluations?
 35. **Testing and teacher evaluations are the only means to determine whether a teacher is being effective with student instruction.**

36. There are teacher biases and that is a fact, some are intended and some are not. Female teachers usually have a preference for girls who are more receptive to teaching as opposed to boys (white or black) who tend to be more difficult and cause the vast majority of discipline problems for teachers. Have teachers been evaluated for bias?

Based on research, it is relatively rare that teachers are given unsatisfactory ratings; even when they do, it may take years to provide remediation or dismiss them..

Getting the answers to the questions is only the first step. Then the data has to be

- (1) analyzed to determine the impacts they have had,
- (2) recommendations for improvement,
- (3) the plan for successful implementation and monitoring, and then most important
- (4) actually monitoring the plan to determine successes and failures and finally
- (5) determining if the failures are fixable; if so, planning for corrections; if not, what options are there?

Furthermore, there are schools and school districts that have had a history of reading failures who have made successful turnarounds. Have their curriculum, techniques and strategies been studied to determine what they did to achieve successful outcomes (made consistent improvements over the years)? If not, why not? If they were copied, obviously their techniques and strategies did not work in Madison. What explains the failure?

An example will be found in this reading series from the Mad School District in Ohio; they got *mad* about their disastrous reading results and did a very successful turnaround in a relatively short period of time. My book, *School Pushouts: A Plague of Hopelessness Perpetrated by Zombie Schools (2012)* provides many other examples and the Internet provides even more. In other words, there have been successful school turnarounds--it can be done!

Effective Teacher Characteristics

Success, in part, depends on effective teachers, but what are the characteristics of effective teachers and have they been incorporated into teacher evaluations? If Madison has a definition of an effective teacher (a teacher who has been most successful in helping all students to learn), I could not find it. If it does exist, it would be useful to compare it with following examples. **It must be understood that there is no perfect or uniform teacher performance characteristics or evaluation forms.** An Internet search revealed several that list characteristics and traits numbering from 5 to 35.

Probably one of the “best” among them is from Educational HORIZONS, Fall 2008: “*Twelve Characteristics of an Effective Teacher:*”

Characteristic 1: Prepared

The most effective teachers come to class each day ready to teach.

1. It is easy to learn in their classes because they are ready for the day.
2. They don't waste instructional time. They start class on time. They teach for the entire class period.
3. Time flies in their classes because students are engaged in learning—i.e., not bored, less likely to fall asleep.

Characteristic 2: Positive

The most effective teachers have optimistic attitudes about teaching and about students. They

1. See the glass as half full (look on the positive side of every situation)
2. Make themselves available to students
3. Communicate with students about their progress
4. Give praise and recognition
5. Have strategies to help students act positively toward one another

Characteristic 3: Hold High Expectations

The most effective teachers set no limits on students and believe everyone can be successful. They

1. Hold the highest standards
2. Consistently challenge their students to do their best
3. Build students' confidence and teach them to believe in themselves

Characteristic 4: Creative

The most effective teachers are resourceful and inventive in how they teach their classes. They

1. Kiss a pig if the class reaches its academic goals
2. Wear a clown suit
3. Agree to participate in the school talent show
4. Use technology effectively in the classroom

Characteristic 5: Fair

The most effective teachers handle students and grading fairly. They

1. Allow all students equal opportunities and privileges
2. Provide clear requirements for the class
3. Recognize that “fair” doesn’t necessarily mean treating everyone the same but means giving every student an opportunity to succeed
4. Understand that not all students learn in the same way and at the same rate

Characteristic 6: Display a Personal Touch

The most effective teachers are approachable. They

1. Connect with students personally
2. Share personal experiences with their classes
3. Take personal interest in students and find out as much as possible about them
4. Visit the students’ world (sit with them in the cafeteria; attend sporting events, plays, and other events outside normal school hours)

Characteristic 7: Cultivate a Sense of Belonging

The most effective teachers have a way of making students feel welcome and comfortable in their classrooms.

1. Students repeatedly mentioned that they felt as though they belonged in classrooms taught by effective teachers.
2. The students knew they had a good teacher who loved teaching and preferred it to other occupations.

Characteristic 8: Compassionate

The most effective teachers are concerned about students’ personal problems and can relate to them and their problems. Numerous stories established how the sensitivity and compassion of caring teachers affected them in profound ways.

Characteristic 9: Have a Sense of Humor

The most effective teachers do not take everything seriously. They

1. Use humor to break the ice in difficult situations
2. Bring humor into the everyday classroom
3. Laugh with the class (but not at the expense of any particular student)

Characteristic 10: Respect Students

The most effective teachers do not deliberately embarrass students. Teachers who give the highest respect, get the highest respect. They

1. Respect students’ privacy when returning test papers
2. Speak to students in private concerning grades or conduct
3. Show sensitivity to feelings and consistently avoid situations that unnecessarily embarrass students

Characteristic 11: Forgiving

The most effective teachers do not hold grudges. They

1. Forgive students for inappropriate behavior
2. Habitually start each day with a clean slate
3. Understand that a forgiving attitude is essential to reaching difficult students
4. Understand that disruptive or antisocial behavior can quickly turn a teacher against a student, but that refusing to give up on difficult students can produce success

Characteristic 12: Admit Mistakes

The most effective teachers are quick to admit being wrong. They

1. Apologize to mistakenly accused students
2. Make adjustments when students point out errors in grading or test material that has not been assigned

To the above can be added:

1. Suspension of bias
2. Stress management
3. Teaching rather than instruction

Other websites provide lists that all come with explanations for each trait or characteristic such as:

Owlcation (Syed H. Meer) 09/07/2018, *Top 9 Characteristics and Qualities of a Good Teacher:*

1. Expert communication skills
2. Superior listening skills
3. Deep knowledge and passion for their subject matter
4. The ability to build caring relationships with students
5. Friendliness and approachability
6. Excellent preparation and organization skills
7. Strong work ethic
8. Community-building skills
9. High expectations for all

Each of these characteristics is fully explained in the article.

What do students believe are the characteristics of an effective teacher are found in the “*Top five qualities of effective teachers, according to students*, (Ashley Peterson-DeLuca,) *Pearson Education* , 10/11/2016:

1. The ability to develop relationships with their students
2. Patient, caring, and kind personality
3. Knowledge of learners
4. Dedication to teaching
5. Engaging students in learning

The *American Board* has a come up with a 2 part series, *The Characteristics of Successful Teachers Part I&II, discussing 16 characteristics:*

Part I:

1. Maintains Class Control
2. Provides Deliberate Instruction, Direction and Support
3. Exhibits Content Expertise
4. Masters Teaching Techniques
5. Continues to Learn
6. Organizes Resources, Classroom Procedures, and Lesson Plans
7. Maintains Current and Accurate Records
8. Maintains Clear and High Expectations for Students

Part II

1. Models Professionalism
2. Uses Creativity and Their Individuality
3. Displays and Promotes Student Work
4. Presents a Positive Attitude
5. Demonstrates Calm and Confidence in a Crisis
6. Remains Loyal
7. Cares About Students
8. Creates a Caring and Welcoming Learning Environment

However, all traits and characteristics may not be immediately *observable*, but this next reference addresses that issue: “*20 Observable Characteristics Of Effective Teaching*,” *TeachThought*, 09/17/2018:

1. Begins class promptly and in a well-organized way.
2. Treats students with respect and caring.
3. Provides the significance/importance of information to be learned.
4. Provides clear explanations.

5. Holds attention and respect of students....practices effective classroom management.
6. Uses active, hands-on student learning.
7. Varies his/her instructional techniques.
8. Provides clear, specific expectations for assignments.
9. Provides frequent and immediate feedback to students on their performance.
10. Praises student answers and uses probing questions to clarify/elaborate answers.
11. Provides many concrete, real-life, practical examples.
12. Draws inferences from examples/models....and uses analogies.
13. Creates a class environment which is comfortable for students....allows students to speak freely.
14. Teaches at an appropriately fast pace, stopping to check student understanding and engagement.
15. Communicates at the level of all students in class.
16. Has a sense of humor!
17. Uses nonverbal behavior, such as gestures, walking around, and eye contact for reinforcement.
18. Presents him/herself in class as 'real people.'
19. Focuses on the class objective and does not let class get sidetracked.
20. Uses feedback from students (and others) to assess and improve teaching.
21. Reflects on own teaching to improve it. (this would be hard to observe)

Madison Teacher Evaluation

Madison does have a very excellent document entitled, ***THE FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING EVALUATION INSTRUMENT 2013 EDITION***. It was an outgrowth of a publication by ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) 1996, followed by an upgrade in 2007 that is very specific and detailed; essentially, it identifies the characteristics of teaching (not teachers) by category with ratings and goes well beyond by including:

1. Designing coherent instruction
2. Designing student assessments
3. Creating a learning environment
4. Provides a culture for learning
5. Managing the classroom and student behavior
6. Engaging students in learning
7. Demonstrating flexibility
8. Reflecting on teaching
9. Maintaining records
10. Communicating with families

It's all done within 105 pages. It really is a self-instruction manual for teachers and administrators. How well it is used or referred too is hard to determine. However, the disastrous reading results would indicate it may be gathering too much dust.

I could not find any good examples of evaluation forms anywhere except one from Cambridge, MA, but there was no way to copy it for this article. Therefore, I have included some of the elements that an evaluation form should contain.

Evaluation Form

Listing the traits or characteristics should provide the basis for a Performance Evaluation Form; but what must be added is a rating system for each one using a numerical system i.e. 1-5, or a worded classification such as *unsatisfactory* to *excellent etc.*

The form itself must include critical identification information such as the following:

1. The policy number authorizing the evaluation, it's purpose, how often observations are to be conducted, who will conduct the evaluation, and whether there is an appeal process for an unsatisfactory rating.
2. Name of teacher, age, race, gender, degrees and certificates, total years of experience in education, years of experience in the district, years of experience in the grade level or subject of the class being observed, whether it is a special class of some type, and if the teacher has been with the class

from the start of the year or replaced the teacher who was. Professional development activities should also be included but as an appendix to the form.

3. Current certification status, in which areas, and whether there were any waivers of requirements.
4. The class being observed must be identified in terms of gender, racial makeup, prior standardized test data for the class (and for each student as an appendix), number of disciplinary referrals and suspensions from the last observation of the current year.
5. There should be an appeal process because a teacher may feel that the evaluator was unjustified or biased in some way in making one or more ratings. If so, the teacher should have a right to have an independent observation.
6. An independent observation can be provided by having an evaluator from another building, if there is more than one school, perform another evaluation. If there is only one school of the grade level in the district, the district can hire retired administrators (much like having a substitute teacher) and paid like a substitute teacher to conduct another evaluation; or the district can have an agreement with another district to share administrators when necessary at no cost. If the teacher still does not receive a satisfactory rating, they should pay for the cost of the evaluator.
7. For all teachers, a list of reading courses they have had or are taking (appendix).
8. If the teacher has had more than one observation, a copy the prior observation (as an appendix). If some ratings were low, quite likely there was an improvement plan to improve; if so, it should be compared to the current observation to determine whether there has been progress if any. Obviously, poor progress should be noted.
9. After the observation, the evaluator must provide an improvement plan for unsatisfactory or low ratings and this should be done with the teacher's input.

Evaluation Waiver Request

Although it has a good evaluation mode, the administration has asked the WDPI to waive the requirements for evaluation due to the problems with the pandemic. "***Madison School Board to request waiver from state-mandated teacher evaluations,***" (Elizabeth Beyer), *WI State Journal*, 10/28/2020:

"The Madison School Board voted unanimously Monday to request a waiver from state-mandated teacher effectiveness evaluations during the 2020-21 school year.

Ahead of Monday's meeting, 112 statements were collected from community members in support of the proposed waiver from the Wisconsin Educator Effectiveness System [cited previously] (This seems strange because it's doubtful that community members know anything about teacher evaluation; it simply is not in their scope of knowledge. It would be interesting to see exactly what they were asked.

A parent and Madison teacher, spoke in favor: 'I am worried that educator effectiveness is going to be what puts me over the edge and I know a lot of my co-workers with families or with other responsibilities have the same feeling.'

Note: Unless such statements like *representing a lot of my co-workers*, is verified with documentation or evidence such as letters, surveys, etc. such claims should be considered meaningless; yet, I have found that board members do get influenced by such statements that anyone can make.

The evaluations, mandated by the State DPI in 2011, are described on its website as "***a performance-based continuous improvement system designed to improve the education of all students in the state of Wisconsin by supporting guided, individualized, self-determined professional growth and development of educators.***" It would seem obvious that this requirement was not followed or, if so, certainly badly implemented since reading maintains a *disastrous* designation. This would also indicate very powerfully that teacher evaluations

are not of any value other than to say it is done which raises the question why no one was held accountable for such a failure. Furthermore, it also puts the blame on the DPI because it obviously does not provide for effective monitoring to see that districts comply with requirements. So what follows is fine rhetoric, but without the intended results.

“Teachers are formally evaluated by their principals in all of the components of the Framework for Teaching, which was selected as the rubric to guide the Educator Effectiveness process, every three years.

The Madison School District Professional Learning and Leadership Development Department in an Oct. 21 memo to the board said a waiver was not needed and requested the district move forward with the evaluations...

Principals will still be coaching, providing feedback and evaluating teachers even if a requested waiver is approved.

Note: Sounds very dynamic, but if it does not result in the intended improvements, it would seem that either the system being used to do so should be scrapped, or the principals are not effective evaluators.

Seeking a waiver does not mean these activities will be discontinued. We have two Educator Effectiveness strategists on staff to coach and support both teachers and principals through the evaluation process. ... We do not believe an EE waiver is needed.

Note: Apparently, these *effectiveness strategists* are either ineffective, or those they coach are ineffective in implementing their coaching strategies. So if they continue the same coaching program, it will simply lead to continued disastrous reading results. [If you always do what you always do, you will always get what you always get].

The Superintendent said he had come to the conclusion that educator effectiveness doesn't align with where the district is at the moment, amid a global health crisis and reckoning over racial injustice. He said a number of teachers and administrators [how many?] approached him in recent weeks to express their concern with moving forward with the evaluations.

Note: What are the numbers? Such broad statements are easy to make and, therefore, need to be verified.

A board member commented that it's pretty clear that our staff are under an inordinate amount of stress right now said. We can do something about the stress they're experiencing by requesting the educational effectiveness waiver.”

Note: Since the waiver would not stop the evaluations, neither will the stress teachers are under.

However, whether the waiver is justified or not is hard to assess, but it has raised and does raise a lot of questions and issues. First, opposing the waiver came from within the ranks of the school system with the promise that evaluations would continue even with a waiver. Of course, no mention was made about exactly what it would include, how often, etc. School policy dictates that evaluations will be done every 3 years. In other words would the waiver delay evaluations for 3 years? It would seem then that this would delay and frustrate the LTF efforts since the evaluations would help them to determine what curriculum and instruction seems most effective or ineffective. So the question can be raised whether this is simply a delaying tactic. Don't forget, there was a similar group 20 years ago, but whatever they came up with obviously did not improve reading outcomes. The school board also came up with recommendations to improve reading; but again, no results. Did they try to determine why there were no results? Recall too that the DPI also initiated reading action to be taken in 2011 and that too did not result in improved reading outcomes. Was it ignored, implemented badly, resisted, etc.? Why and how did that happen? The history in Madison is that no matter what is tried to improve reading, the results remain *disastrous*.

Keep in mind that a waiver will not make the problem go away or get improved results. The problem exists for one primary reason: **instruction and monitoring is ineffective, but not for all students.** The pandemic rests with boys--a problem not recognized since there seems to be nothing in the reading improvement efforts from the State or district targeting boys). If teaching was ineffective (1) either the teachers were at fault, but not likely since they taught white students and even some minority students successfully or (2) the “system” was and is at fault for failing to identify that it is a boy problem and failing to evaluate the instructional strategies and curriculum teachers are required to use. It's also hard to blame the

principals since they are not required to have any reading content knowledge; therefore, how would they know what to evaluate as effective?

During the last quarter of the 20th century, there was a national movement for *Total Quality Management* primarily because American products were not exhibiting quality standards particularly with autos. The guru of quality standards was Dr. W. Edward Deming who was responsible for turning Japanese manufacturing from *shoddy* to *quality*. He had a set of quality principles, one of which was, *do not blame the people, blame the system in which they must operate*.

The article also indicated that since 2011 the State required ***a performance-based continuous improvement system***...If such was being practiced in Madison, how could reading be so disastrous? It certainly requires an explanation. Perhaps there were mitigating factors and, if so, not only the community but the staff as well, needs to know what they were. The new superintendent certainly cannot be blamed.

You can imagine the Task Force coming up with the exact wording as one of its recommendations, but recommendations do not mean that they were the right recommendations or that they will be implemented successfully. The key to any reform is an effective monitoring program to ensure that what has been recommended or required gets done in the right ways; the lack of effective monitoring is the cancer in all reforms. [The issues and problem are usually found in the details and that is why no detail is unimportant]

Interestingly as I was finishing this article, a very well written and comprehensive article appeared about the problem, ***“A fundamental right: Madison schools consider a new way to teach reading,”*** (Scott Girard), *Capital Times--Madison*, 12/10/2020:

“...the science of reading, is a literacy teaching method the School District is shifting toward as it confronts low reading proficiency rates among its students. It’s a move away from the ‘balanced literacy’ approach the district has had in the past, in which literacy is taught through a variety of readings and word studies, to a more phonics-focused format of teaching students how to read.

*Bilingual resource teacher Lisa Hepburn at Randall Elementary School, where she has begun using what’s known as the **science of reading** to teach literacy. ‘It changed my life,’”*

Currently, it’s a method employed by some individual teachers, but only systematically at two schools. There, teachers are testing out new curricula the district could adopt as it acquires new materials and rethinks teacher training.

Note: It would be interesting to find out if this was initiated by the teachers on their own or whether it was some type of pilot program. If it was on their own, it indicates that teachers do not have to follow any reading required curriculum; although these teachers should be commended for their effort because it was right and effective. It also indicates that perhaps there is a lack of teacher monitoring to follow required curriculum and that should not be happening without the sanction of the administration. In a large district particularly, teachers should not be doing their own thing if it violates required policies, practices and curriculum; that’s why learning gaps occur.

The need for something new is clear, as many consider literacy a key driver of the gaps in academic achievement between the district’s white students and peers of color. It has spurred collaborative effort between the University of Wisconsin-Madison, School of Education and MMSD, as a task force announced Monday will investigate the best practices for teaching literacy.

Note: This is hopefully a smart move that should have been done years ago.

Even before his hire, superintendent Jenkins...said he believed in following the ‘science’ of being able to teach reading.’

‘I do wholeheartedly believe that literacy itself is a fundamental right, and we should be pushing that all children should be able to read...It’s just the gateway to everything else to do.’ Jenkins called the district’s new approach ‘bold,’ especially for Black children...he’s “willing to die on the cross over it, period, if it helps more students learn to read. There’s no reason that all children should not be able to read, Jenkins said. [appropriately and perfectly stated that showed conviction and passion].

However, the history is that superintendents who were willing to *die on the cross* were thrown under the bus for a passion or conviction because in city districts politics plays an important role; that's why the average life of a city superintendent is 3 years.

Note: However, it's not 'bold' [chancy] since research indicates it is the right thing to do and it works; what would be bold is a *Reading Renaissance Act* (described at the end).

The years-long process got a boost from local voters Nov. 3 with their approval of the \$33 million operating referendum. It adds \$6 million to this year's budget, part of which will allow the district to move more quickly in its implementation by adopting new materials and curriculum this year rather than spreading it out over this year and next, which was the plan if the referendum failed...

Some community members have pushed for years for more of a focus on explicit phonics, a position that more closely aligns with what Hernandez and Hepburn had found through their own research in the science of reading..

Materials are key to any change in teaching reading in the district, and part of the funding for adopting a new curriculum will go toward acquiring new materials. Beyond finding books that will allow the students to challenge themselves with new words and phonemic concepts, the district has also stressed the need for books that represent all students through characters and plot lines...

Note: Although materials are critical, they are not the key; the key is the teacher who can mess up any materials.

Ladson-Billings has known early literacy is a major issue in MMSD for more than two decades. In the late 1990s, she and another researcher undertook a three-year project at Lowell...By the end of their project all of the school's third-graders passed their reading test— the first time there was such widespread success.

Note: Translated, it means that Madison knew what it took to teach all children to read, including boys and minorities, and they had the person who did it; yet, it failed to implement the success from 20 years ago. How did it happen?

First of all, we had them identify who are the kids in the class that you're currently concerned about (who) will not be successful in reading and literacy? They had no trouble telling us who those kids were.

*Ladson-Billings, recalled noticing early on that the students teachers identified as struggling readers **were overwhelmingly Black and brown kids, many of them boys.** But she and the other researcher did not point that out to the teachers, and instead let them realize it on their own, which they did as spring came around.*

That's where teacher preparation programs come in. UW-Madison School of Education Dean Diana Hess acknowledged that, 'Literacy is a big part of our teacher ed. programs because it's such an important part of our education.'

Note: What has not been mentioned at all is that there is a philosophical reading war about the best way to teach reading (balance vs phonics) that is still raging, and it's base is found in the Schools (departments) of Education nationwide located in the universities and colleges. Teaching literacy is done in all schools of education, but there is a wide gulf among them as to the best way to do it in the classrooms despite the overwhelming research evidence. [It's hard to try and teach smart people how to learn]. Think of it as the gulf between liberals and conservatives that's all based on beliefs, true or not, just like the reading wars.

This is the perfect time to begin to think about how do we not only go through COVID-19, but how we come out of it better prepared, 'Jenkins said Monday in the press conference announcing the task force. It's right for the education department, it's right for MMSD and it's right for the children.'

It's easy to pay lip service to a fundamental change like shifting toward research-backed literacy methods, but Dr. Jenkins is doing much more than paying lip service as near as we can tell.

'he said' This feels real, it doesn't feel like Madison's usual talking about it and forming a task force and having a series of meetings and producing a report. We've had decades of that kind of inaction.'
Wow, he got it right!

The content of this article and Supt Jenkins' support brings hope because it indicates that all parts of the **system** may be coming together to work in harmony (hopefully) with a new superintendent who seems to have an excellent grasp of the Madison disastrous reading problem. The issue for the new Task Force is to ensure that they seek answers to the right questions, analyze the results, make the necessary recommendations, determine the implementation strategies, and--this is where it always falls apart--monitoring the implementation to determine success and/or failure.

In reality, this is a reform effort and few reforms ever succeed, (that's why there is reform after reform after reform, etc. not because they did not intend to achieve success, but rather the failure to have a detailed implementation plan and monitor how it's being done. A lot of players are involved with different roles to play (like an orchestra), and it will take a masterful conductor (superintendent) to orchestrate all players to play in harmony for the success of all children. Time will determine the outcome.

However, think about the fact that the 2000 National Reading Panel was the source for the *science of reading*, but why Madison failed to use this information 20 years ago when the *Citizens Advisory Group* had been put into place is a real mystery; in other words, two decades were lost that claimed too many reading victims unnecessarily. Hopefully, this effort will be a reading renaissance for Madison and its children and not a recycling of the past failures.

What would a Reading Renaissance reform consist of at the district or state level?

Proposed Reading Renaissance Act

What must be kept in mind is that with more and more reforms and the addition of more and more resources, most failing schools have not been closed and continue to deliver candidates for the school-to-prison pipeline that has very costly and deadly consequences. If the same such efforts continue, the results will be the same; worse yet, no one is ever held accountable because only in education are there no meaningful consequences for failure. Remember too that education is a responsibility of the states, and it has the authority to enact needed legislation with effective consequences.

Also, all districts are required to provide a minimum level of education; and since learning requires literacy skills, it is safe to say that such skills are required; in fact, two recent lawsuits in California and Detroit have adjudicated that schools are not just responsible for teaching literacy, ***but it must be done effectively***. Both a state and a district have been found negligent in doing so and must now provide millions of dollars for remediation. It is similar to what the district demands of students and staff when they do not adhere to policies, rules, regulations and requirements, they are "penalized" in some way. However, the difference in the RR Act is that it requires financial consequences and penalties to the district and individuals when necessary because it is the only "punishment" that has meaning and will get the attention of staff and policymakers. Incidentally, there are many more such lawsuits in the judicial pipeline.

Another factor to consider is that schools have a minimum of 9 years to teach literacy before students can dropout out, but these years failed to do so, and will continue to do so until there are consequences. Staff must be held accountable in some effective way. This is absolutely necessary because students and society pay a terrible price with the school-to-prison pipeline results.

What follows is a proposal for state legislation because it is the only way to have (1) consistency and meaningful consequences to districts that fund and harbor these failing, Zombie, schools, (2) put an end to failing schools and (3) end the academic pandemic all at far less cost.

It is called ***The Reading Renaissance (rebirth) Act*** designed to concentrate on the one subject required for all academic learning to succeed *Can't Read, Can't Learn*.

The proposal requires minimum hours, days or weeks in which RR remediation must be provided, but districts do have the option to provide more time at their discretion.

Proposed Legislation

Preamble: Since education is the responsibility of the state, every parent has a right to expect that regardless of location, the schools will provide a minimal level of quality and effective education. Likewise, students who are required to attend schools also have the same right to expect a minimal level of ***effective quality instruction and learning*** regardless of gender, race or ethnicity. This does not mean that every student will achieve the same results because that is mission impossible due to genetics, motivation and interests, but all students can learn what is required to function successfully in the society, and earn a decent living

The problem with schools is that they expect the same learning to take place in the same time frame regardless of gender, race and ethnicity. That simply has not happened after generations of schooling practices along with more resources (staffing and money).

Although not explicitly stated, acquiring literacy skills is the most important skill in the learning process since all other academics rest on those skills; in other words, it is the key to learning and, as a result, without it the cause of failure—it's not due to poverty. Without basic literacy skills it becomes difficult for students to function reasonably successfully in work endeavors, societal activities, and pursue further education.

However, various test results indicate that there are significant disparities by gender, race, ethnicity, and location (city, suburban, rural) and one reason constantly mentioned is the difference in local funding. Yet, even within larger districts, with the same per pupil funding, disparities exist among its schools. Obviously, funding alone cannot be given the entire blame.

To make matters worse, when it comes to teaching the most fundamental skill to learn—reading--there is a known reading war among educators in public schools, as well as, colleges of education public or private. Reading is the most studied of all academic subjects and an attempt to bring a peaceful resolution resulted in the *Science of Reading*; it should have ended the wars; unfortunately, it did not and the student casualties **did not know they were involved in a war.**

Furthermore, the reason why there is a State Department of Education is to provide consistency in certain practices and procedures involved with public schools statewide such as attendance, transportation, curriculum, teacher certification, etc., and it has the responsibility to pass any regulations to equalize education for all students. When there are significant disparities, such as reading skills, it must make every effort to have districts prevent and remediate literacy deficits; tragically and shamefully, it has not happened after decades in too many schools, mostly inner city schools.

Therefore, legislation is needed to correct known deficiencies and disparities in order to have more equalized fundamental education for all students.

I. Key Components

- A. The purpose of this legislation known as the *Reading Renaissance Act* is to codify into law the following:
 1. To end the existence of failing schools identified by 80% of students failing to achieve grade level reading in grades 2-11.
 2. Allow the SDE to provide for district financial consequences by withholding a percentage of state per pupil aid depending on the grade level attained below 80%, delineated in #IIA10 below.
 3. Failing schools will be replaced by one or more charter magnet schools funded by the district per pupil cost of the students from the failing schools who must attend the charter school(s).
 4. Require a single reading program known as *The Science of Reading* (it includes all the methods or approaches that have been found, through research, to give kids a learning advantage in reading) that all schools must adopt and teach effectively.

A successful lawsuit concerning the teaching of literacy in California should serve as a model since their reading results statewide were so disastrous that the legislature passed a law requiring the effective teaching of literacy. A Detroit lawsuit also confirmed that the district has the same responsibility to teach literacy and both were penalized financially by providing more dollars for literacy remediation.

5. Specific goals for reading recovery/remediation activities are mandated; and when not achieved, a percentage of per pupil state aid will be withheld from the district.
6. Summer school attendance (determined by classroom hours) will be required for students who fail to reach specific reading levels.
7. Financial penalties are authorized for any employee who in any way cheats or is deceitful in altering, distorting, or falsifying testing, reading and other data.
8. Hold educators financially accountable who don't adhere to the legislative requirements.
9. Since reading is an essential component of all academic subjects, all academic teachers will need to be trained in the *Science of Reading* and how it pertains to their specific academic specialty.
10. To ensure compliance with the legislation, the SDE is authorized to have an Office of Inspector General.

II. Requirements

A. Following are the requirements with the specific language to implement I. A. (above).

1. Responsibility

The State Department of Education (SDE), managed by the State Superintendent, will have the responsibility for implementing and managing the RR Act that will take effect Jan 1 following the year of passage.

- a. In order to have consistency to remediate reading deficiencies, all schools must provide *of Reading* for reading instruction.

2. Teacher Training

New Academic Hires must have or will need to be trained in the *Science of Reading* and such training must be completed prior to the start of the school year.

3. Inspector General

History indicates that there are educators and other employees who do not follow prescribed policies and practices and, in fact, resort to actions that are unethical and corrupt. Therefore, the SDE is authorized to hire an IG to manage an Office of Inspector General. The SDE will appoint an interviewing team of no less than three professionals to interview and recommend candidates for the positions to the State Superintendent who will have final approval authority.

- a. The IG will responsible for ensuring that the RR program will be implemented as prescribed and recommend appropriate district actions if the law is not being followed. Further, the IG is authorized to take lawful action against any employee who participates in cheating or deceitful practices to circumvent the legislation. Such action will include financial penalties to the district or individuals involved and loss of certification when warranted.
- b. The IG is authorized to hire 1 to 6 assistants (depending on the size of the state) using the following population points as a general guideline to be determined by the State Superintendent: (1 assistant)--2.8M–5.28M, (2)--5.28M–8.26M, (3) 8.26M–11.6M, (4)11.6M–19.6M, (5)19.6M–26.5M, (6)--38.4 plus; (source Wikipedia 2019 state populations) and an IG secretary.
- c. Qualifications for the IG and assistants will be determined by the State Superintendent and the members of the interviewing team. Among the qualifications must be a thorough knowledge of the *Science of Reading*, and knowledge and/or experience in the use of tests and the various ways in which testing data can be distorted in any way. *Fair Test* is an excellent resource for this purpose. This knowledge will be a critical factor in assessing student reading growth and issues that can result in financial consequences to the district.
- d. Office space will be provided in the SDE or nearby facilities.
- e. Funding
The Office of IG, salaries, benefits, office equipment and supplies, and travel expenses (cars will not be purchased) will be funded by the State.
- f. Since everyone has one or more credit cards, no credit cards will be allowed, so personal credit cards would be used by staff when needed and will then be reimbursed with purchase receipts within 15 calendar days of submission. As a type of compensation for using personal credit cards, any credit card rewards will accrue to the holder.

4. Identifying Students

Between Jan 1 and end of February or sooner, the SDE will develop a procedure requiring every school to identify and submit all regular education students starting with students who will enter grade 3 and excluding students who will be entering grade 12, who are one or more years below reading grade level indicating the student's name, gender, race, age, grade, test scores, known

medical problems, mental health disorders, and any disabilities that could interfere with learning, and school location.

- a. Students with medical problems, mental health disorder(s), or disabilities known to significantly impede learning can be excused, but verification in writing will be needed to be supported by appropriate professional evidence. However, if prior test data and report card grades results indicate these factors did not impede learning, even if professionals state otherwise, they must be included.
- b. Special education students must be listed with the same ID information required of regular education students. However, since they have had a PPT and a remediation plan for their disability or disorder, they will be excused upon documentary evidence that they are, in fact, special education students.
- c. If they had reading deficits (mostly boys), they would have been addressed during the PPT process and plan, and if there is a reading remediation plan it will have to be revised to include the *Science of Reading* unless compelling evidence can be presented that the current plan is preferable.
- d. Those students who are three or more years below grade level must be evaluated (if it has not been done so previously) to determine what could have caused such a reading deficit. This forensic review will be conducted by a team consisting of an reading specialist, administrator, school psychologist, social worker, and school doctor. If any such conditions are found, the team will determine if they can be addressed by the school or would need to be referred to an outside resource for follow-up. This review can begin as soon as the students are identified; and, if necessary, it will continue into the summer session.

5. Testing

The testing data must include any current tests normally administered in school districts such as the NAEP, PISA, SAT/ACT, state tests, and district standardized tests. The only new test, if not already included, is a standardized reading test to be adopted. (“a” next). What should be considered in selecting the tests is to select those with time limits of no more than 30 minutes.

- a. The SDE will contract for three standardized reading tests to be provided (if possible by different companies) and supplied to the school districts at state expense. Test one, would be used during year one, test two at the end of year two, and test three at the end of year three to determine reading growth. The Internet *classroom website* lists five of the most common ones used.
- b. Test one will be administered at the start of the summer session and again at the end to determine reading growth.
- c. Since there is no perfect test, and since there will be financial consequences based on test results, the district can use additional standardized tests data to determine if such test (s) indicate that reading goals were reached. Such documentation will be submitted to the IG office to determine if they can be considered as a substitute score.
- d. There will be no averaging of test data because it hides too many problems.
- e. Needless to say, tests need to be secured to prevent any opportunity for cheating.

6. Submission of the RR List

Between March 1 and April 30 the schools will follow the SDE plan and submit the list of students reading below grade level.

7. Remediation Plan

Since the schools would know what is to be done well in advance, starting Jan 1 or sooner, all schools would need to develop a minimum of two plans, grades 2-8 and 9-11, to remediate reading deficiencies for those grade level students. Districts can develop additional plans for different grade configurations if they believe it will be more effective.

8. Summer Session:

The RR remediation will start in a required summer session of 6 weeks or longer duration funded by the district. Students below one grade level will have minimum of two classroom hours daily (A classroom hour would consist of no less than 45 minutes or longer) devoted to reading remediation, two grade levels below will have a minimum of three hours, and three years below a minimum of 4 hours.

- a. If there are any mental health disorders involved, a MH plan must be developed to address such needs to complement the RR program. The cost of any additional resources will be the responsibility of the district, but one-half of the cost will be reimbursed with justifications by the state for the first year, one third for year two and the remaining cost for year three.

- b. A separate plan must be developed for those high school students who dropped out and are recovered (see #18).
- c. The district can add any other course requirements providing that they will not be disruptors or conflict with reading recovery.
- d. Free transportation will be provided.
- e. Breakfast will be served.
- f. With parent permission, a multivitamin chosen by the school doctor will also be provided according to age. A school district made remarkable progress by simply adding a multivitamin regimen.
- g. Some type of physical activity must take place between reading sessions.
- h. Districts can partner with other districts or a collaborative to conduct the summer session.
- i. If the forensic evaluations of the students three or more years behind have not been completed (see 4d) it will continue during the summer session meaning that the professionals involved will need to be compensated at district expense.

9. Results

- a. At the end of summer session, the same reading pre-test will be administered to determine reading growth. Students who attain grade level, within 10%, will then be excused from further remediation unless the district wants them to remain.
- b. Those students not at grade level, will be required to participate in a RR regimen during the school year as follows: one year behind, two classroom hrs daily until grade level is reached; two years behind, three classroom hours daily until grade level is reached; three or more behind, four classroom hours daily until grade level is reached. If this means students in grades 2-8 will miss any required curriculum, the district will not be penalized in any way.
- c. If students in grade 9-11 cause them to miss any graduation requirements, they will not be penalized.

10. EVALUATION AND CONSEQUENCES:

The consequence to the district for students not within 10% of grade level will be as follows:

a. End of year one:

At the end of year one (June), students will be administered test #1 of the standardized reading tests adopted. For each such student below one year grade level, one fourth of the per pupil state aid will be withheld; two years below, one-third of the state aid per-pupil will be withheld; and three years or more one-half of the state aid per pupil will be withheld.

- RR funds will be kept in a separate account by the SDE to be used to reimburse the state for start-up funds, or reimbursing the district for a portion of extra mental health resources. Any remaining funds may be used as grants to districts that submit applications for innovative programming. This does not prevent the district from applying for other grant funds.
- Those students who have not reached grade level will be required to attend a summer session similar to #8.
- However, each student who made progress from the start of the year (Sept 1 to June) amounting to 18 months or more even though grade level was not reached, will have only one quarter of per pupil aid withheld rather than one third.

b. Year Two:

At the end of year two, reading test #2 will be administered. Those students not at grade level (within 10%), will have one-half of the state per pupil aid withheld until they reach grade level.

- The district can decide whether to conduct a forensic evaluation to determine if some unknown mitigating conditions are involved for some students, and if documented, the district can then submit verifiable evidence that could mitigate or prevent withholding of state aid; and with compelling evidence, students can be removed from the RR program (some will likely be referred for special education). However, documentation would have to be very compelling and not just an effort to get them excused or into special education, **and socio-economic conditions cannot be used for justification.**
- Those students not at grade level will be required to attend a summer session similar to #8.

c. Year Three--School Failure:

At the end of year three, test #3 will be administered. If a school does not get 80% of its students at grade level at the end of year 3, the district will have four choices:

- (1) Close the school and reassign the students to other schools in the district who are at grade level or to a new charter school--see #13.
- (2) If the school is kept opened, the district will lose two-thirds per pupil state aid or

- (3) Start a RR charter school--see #11.
- (4) If a district believes it has a better option, such request can be made to the SDE.
- d. Those students who did not reach grade level by the end of year 3, a forensic evaluation will be required at district expense to include medical, mental, academic issues and family situation to determine if there are one or more disruptors that may be interfering with RR success. A comprehensive plan must then be developed and implemented addressing such needs in the in the summer session following year three and beyond or if a charter is developed to assign them to the new charter that would start Sept 1.

11. **CHARTERS:**

There are many issues and factors to consider in starting a charter school, but all do not have to be included in the RR Act requirements (another discussion will follow this section) because they are matters for the SDE to deal with.

- a. A charter (one or more depending on the size of the district and the grade configurations) will be decided from a proposal by the district, but with final approval by State Superintendent.
- b. A charter can only be started with SDE approval at that time (end of three years); or as an option, a district can include a charter as part of the initial plan.
- c. The primary purpose of the charter is to start with a clean slate and concentrate resources in one building that can then create a culture of reading success. This can also be achieved in partnership with one or more neighboring schools, or as part of a collaborative program. However the charter will only be granted if all failing schools are closed, and if it meets all SDE requirements.
 - **A failing school will be one in which 80% of students are not at grade level in reading.**
- d. The charter will be required to operate 12 months with 4 weeks of vacation time, with two weeks during the year and 2 weeks in the summer. This would ensure learning continuity for these students who have had a history of failure.
- e. Salaries for teachers and administrators will be determined by the district taking into consideration the additional time required of the staff; but in addition, in order to attract teachers who will be teaching academic subjects one or more incentives can be provided.
- f. Whether the charter is started as part of the initial plan (that would require all failing schools to be closed) or any time between then and the end of year three, the funds would still come from the students of the closed schools. Essentially, the students would simply be enrolling in another district school so there would not be any extra expense to the district.

12. **Staffing:**

The RR charter schools will start with a new staff and administration. Applicants, other than administrators, can be staff laid off from closed schools, other district schools or from available candidates.

a. **Skills:**

- Candidates will have to demonstrate their knowledge of the *Science of Reading* if they will be teaching any academic subject. If enough candidates with the knowledge are not available, conditional hiring would be allowed if they pass a Science of Reading program in a summer session provided by the district or others, before the charter opens and followed up during the year if more training is needed.
- Since this will be primarily a boy school, one of the issues to consider is any successful experience in teaching boys whether a male or female candidate. It need not be limited to schooling, but with any activities in the community that deals with boys, tutoring with boys, etc. Also, experienced teachers should be able to show if they have been successful in teaching boys in typical classrooms of both genders.
- b. Administrative candidates must have prior knowledge of the Science of Reading to fill any administrative positions since they will be evaluating teachers focusing on their ability to effectively teach and use the Science of Reading in other academic subjects.
- c. **Evaluations:**

All academic teachers will be evaluated yearly with a minimum of two written evaluations that would be focused on providing effective reading instruction in whatever academic class they teach.
- d. Administrators will also need to be evaluated for their efforts to make the charter a success school, encouraging teachers, supporting teachers in disciplinary matters, developing activities designed to make students feel welcomed, etc. They can be considered for a bonus; however, if no teacher receives a bonus, no administrator can receive a bonus because it would show that the principal did not motivate the teachers.

13. Charter Failure:

- a. If at the end of year one, 80% of the students are not at grade level (within 10%), the charter will be placed on probation that will require a district program reevaluation to determine what changes need to be made.
- b. If at the end of year two, 80% are not at grade level, staff and parents would be told that the charter will be closed if 80% is not achieved at the end of year three. Needless to say, if close to 80%, it's possible that it can reach that goal by the end of year three. An option is for the charter to do a mid-year test to see if progress is being made. This will allow parents and staff to make alternative plans.

c. Options:

The district would then have some options (1) if the charter is close to the 80% by the end of year 3, it can request a delay until the summer session is complete to see if the goal is reached (2) those students who have reached grade level, can be reassigned to other district schools (3) those students not at grade level would need to be assigned to a new charter with the same rules to follow that started the first charter. This will prevent a charter from becoming a new failing school, and the district will still be held accountable.

14. CheDe Penalties:

Unfortunately, too many districts and schools have been found by *Fair Test* to have engaged in cheating and deceitful practice (CheDe) to falsify or distort data.

- a. Any employee who is found directly involved with falsifying or distorting data in any way, or any employee found to have aided in the testing/data deception, will be fined \$5,000; and any administrator will be fined \$10,000. However, any staff member who pressured subordinates to falsify or distort data will be fined \$25,000. Until the fine is paid, the employee will be suspended without pay.
- b. A second offense will result in action to discharge the employee with loss of certification.

15. Mitigating Circumstances

Since there will likely be mitigating circumstance over which the school has no control, it could result in less consequences:

- a. If verification by a medical or psychiatric doctor indicates unanticipated medical or mental health conditions that interfered with the learning process (see #4b), there would be no penalty providing that an appropriate plan is developed to address the problem(s).
- b. If unanticipated financial conditions developed for the district over which it had no control (COVID is a good example), it could be a mitigating condition for the SDE to consider; in addition, if there were key staff turnovers involved with the reading recovery effort, it too can be considered as a mitigating factor. However, this may be an indication that something is happening in the school causing the teachers to leave; if this is found to be the case, the IG would investigate to determine the cause and provide a fix.

16. Appeals Panel:

In all probability, since there may be disputes involved or if a district feels mitigating circumstances should be considered, the SDE will establish a panel of no less than 3 professionals who would have no conflict of interests to review and reach a decision and make a recommendation to the State Superintendent who will make a final decision.

17. Student Changes

New students moving into the district during the year would be exempted for that year; but the district would be wise to test the student(s) who could perhaps receive remediation because they will be in the count the following school year.

- a. Students who leave the district for legitimate reasons (verified), would be dropped from the RR list.

18. Dropout Recovery

Roaming the streets (if they are already not behind bars) are those students who dropped out of school

mainly due to academic failure resulting from can't read, can't learn issues. Therefore, each district will alone, in partnership with other districts, or participating with a collaborative (best choice) develop a plan and process to recover the dropouts and return them back to complete their education and obtain a diploma.

- a. They will not return to the same school they dropped out of for two reasons (1) their prior history will get in the way of learning and (2) the building experience will constantly remind them of their previous failure. They would need a different school, and most likely, an

alternative education. Ideally, a collaborative that represents several districts can more easily develop such a school and/or alternative education program.

- b. The alternative education model should allow them to start at any time during the year; therefore, the learning materials must be primarily, not exclusively, computer self-paced programs that would track their progress and provide repetition until learning takes place. On line learning may not be practical with these students because they will not have developed the self-discipline needed. Also, as explained in chapter 6, they should work in cubicles for privacy.
- c. This Renaissance Laboratory should be inviting, with new or remodeled furniture to provide a look and feeling of success showing that the school really cares about them. Study cubicles do not have to be purchased because they can be made easily with 2x4's and plywood.
- d. Preferably they should be located in a separate building or isolated in a building. In addition, they should not be allowed to mingle with the regular student body.

19. Adjustment Option

States have a variety of district sizes and locations in which all of the proposed RR provisions may not fit neatly. Therefore, if a district would like to propose some adjustments (exclusive of consequences and penalties) that would meet the intent of the RR law, it can submit a proposal for the SDE to consider.

20. Funding

Since it will take a year for a fund to accumulate from consequences and penalties, start-up funds (IG office, 50% mental health reimbursements and other related costs) for one and possibly two years may need to be provided that will be reimbursed from the fund either partially or fully depending on the amount in the fund. If after the state is reimbursed, any remaining funds can be used as grants:

- a. Grants would be competitive with guidelines developed by the SDE to provide for proposals that would be innovative in complementing the RR program in the charter schools. Amounts would depend on the fund balance, if any.

21. Costs

The costs involved will not be significant and most will probably be covered by income from the consequences and penalties.

- The IG Office for a maximum of 7 staff (the IG and 1-6 assistants to help monitor the program) employed for 12 months plus a secretary, office equipment and supplies along with travel costs will require less than a \$1,000,000 a year: \$125-150,000 for the IG, and \$80-90,000 average for the staff monitors, \$50,000 for a secretary plus benefits and office expenses depending on the cost of living conditions in the state.
- The cost for the tests supplied to the local districts will be determined once the tests are selected. Certainly the state aid that will be withheld for students not at grade level should cover most if not all costs during at least the first 3 years when the bulk of state aid will be withheld; thereafter, there should be less and less students in reading recovery.
- Districts will be reimbursed for on-half of the cost to provide additional mental health services for the first 3 years (8a).

22. Unions

Charters will not be allowed to unionize.

SDE Charter Considerations

These issues do not need to be part of the RR Act since they should be decisions that are dependent on district needs, as well as, opportunities for innovative ideas that that can be pursued by districts but with the SDE approval.

The key question is can charters reverse the decline in reading test scores and a definitive answer comes from a newly published book, "*Charter School City, What the End of Traditional Public Schools in New Orleans Means for American Education*," authored by Douglas N. Harris, Univ of Chicago Press, 2020, describing the turnaround of schools in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina.

Note: New Orleans schools were previously rated as the worst district in the state until Hurricane Katrina

“Almost every school in the city was converted into a charter school, greatly expanding choice and competition. Those newly opened schools differed greatly from their predecessors in terms of their pedagogy and curriculum, often emphasizing ‘no excuses’ approaches and college-prep academics. Highly educated people from outside the city were imported by programs like Teach for America and soon constituted a large share of the city’s teaching workforce.

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Harris is confident he knows what did and did not account for positive results in New Orleans. He writes: “**Closing and taking over low-performing schools was the factor, above all others,** that explains the improved student outcomes...but competition was not at the root of it...

The only empirical evidence he presents to bolster the claim that state takeovers, and not competition, caused improvements in New Orleans can be found in the results of a 2016 working paper he co-authored, “***The Effects of Performance- Based School Closure and Charter Takeover on Student Performance,***” published by the Tulane research center. “***That study finds that students who attended schools closed by the state and reopened with new operators experienced gains in their academic achievement.***”

Children are now flourishing in the radically restructured schools; in fact, New Orleans can now be viewed as a leading example of what a 21st Century school system can look like and what can be achieved for minority students in a different schooling environment.

Of significance is that the prior public school staff who were mostly minority were let go and the charters recruited white, out of district, teachers contradicting the claim that black students would only learn better from teachers of color.

Further, he attributes its success to the fact that the failing schools were closed and replaced with the charters and new staff. Consider too that the same socio-economic conditions still exist that schools use as excuses to justify why public schools cannot succeed in poverty districts. Socio-economic conditions are alibis and not causes of failing schools; it’s what happens in a school that is the most important and not socio-economic conditions.

Charter Issues

All the research indicates that minority parents (mothers) love charter schools because students are far more successful than they were in the typical traditional public school, therefore, the charter school starts on a positive note. But, a BIG BUT remains: The charter school would be essentially a segregated minority school which, of course, was also true of the failing schools mostly located in impoverished city areas.

- **Issue #1--Purpose**

The purpose of the charter is to concentrate the reading resources and effort in one building in order to create of culture of learning based on literacy skills; in other words, it will be a Reading Renaissance Charter concentrating on remediating literacy skills.

- **Issue #2—The Building**

The assumption is that a closed failure schools would be transformed into charters. Since the SDE must approve the charter based on a district application, it can require certain conditions to be met. One of the critical conditions would be to update the building cosmetically (painting alone would do wonders with new ceiling tiles, lighting, and flooring all cosmetic changes that could be done quickly and inexpensively during the summer; any remaining needs can be done evenings and on weekends). The cosmetic effort must show on the outside of the building (no broken windows graffiti, or trash around the building, and dressing up the entrance to make it “welcoming.”

This facelift should create a new school look. Thus, students would feel that they are attending a “new” school designed to welcome them for success.

- **Issue #3—Student Body**

Like it or not, the students from the failing schools, not up to grade level, must be required to enroll in the charter. To do otherwise would create chaos for the district logistically and financially. However, although they would have first preference, it should be opened to other students such as children from the same family and those who would prefer a charter school. This is needed because having a student body of all failed students would not be wise since it would be looked upon as a school for “dummies.”

A related issue is whether to make it boy charter since practically all of the students will be minority boys. However, it would be prudent to try and attract white boys to provide diversification with no intention of preventing girls from applying.

That will then depend on the type of charter it is and its programming to be discussed under Issue #4., but it also will depend on numbers and building size. For example, if grade 11 students are brought up to grade level after year one, they could then be assigned to a regular grade 12 class elsewhere.

- **Issue #4--Grade Configuration.**

Students would be coming from different grade levels from failing schools covering grades 2-11, but possibly grade 12 by the end of year one. However, if a district opts to start a charter at the beginning of the RR Act, it then could be grade levels 2-11 (after one year grade 11 students would move on to grade 12; and depending on their reading grade level be in a regular grade 12 or continue in the charter for continued remediation.) Therefore, the grade configuration of the charter has to be decided early on. Quite possibly, there would need to be two 2-6 and 7-11 or some other combination depending on numbers and building size. A single configuration of 2-11 would not be a wise choice, but an option would be to divide a large enough building into two sections to handle two configurations.

- **Issue #5—Student Diversification**

What incentive (s) could attract white students and girls who are not failing to attend the charter?

A cosmetic fix-up would be a must, but there must be compelling program magnets to get their interest and it should begin with the name; a suggestion is to call it an *Renaissance Charter*—a classy name to identify the charter covering the elementary grades. Also the diversification issue may not be as important for these grades that must concentrate on the RR program.

A possible name for the secondary charter could be *The Career Renaissance Charter*. This would allow for different career interests; again the size and location of the student body must be considered. However, since practically all of them will be located in cities manufacturing, technology and automotive careers would probably be dominant. Of course, the larger the student body and building would make it more practical to have several magnet majors. Therefore, the type of charter and it's magnet programs will determine the type of student diversity.

- **Issue #6—Charter Types**

It is becoming more obvious that the mania for a college education is beginning to wane mainly

because of the insane tuitions and the years it takes for the average student to graduate which is now 6 years. Therefore, as was the situation years ago in larger cities, high schools were like magnet schools specializing in career training and there were vocational/technical schools. Also, considering the income levels of families whose children attend failing schools, college is not a good economic choice even with college scholarships and loans.

Therefore, the charters should concentrate on career applications for the secondary students.

They would not be competing with regular magnet high schools because again these charters provide concentrated literacy skills first and foremost.

Another factor to consider is the physical location of the charter that could fill the needs of area employers; students would then know that jobs are readily available after high school.

What would attract secondary students? Certainly for boys (and some girls) there are two prime magnets, high tech and automotive majors! Obviously, these two magnets would attract a more diversified student body. Most important, this particular magnet is to solve the boy pandemic and not be some kind of politically correct model of sorts. Although girls would be a distraction for boys; nevertheless, girls should be invited to apply.

For example, having a tech major could allow the tech department to be housed in the building thereby providing practical applications for repairs and software that all schools need. This would allow apprenticeships where students can be mentored by the employed staff of the tech department. The department can also make an income by charging a nominal fee to the staff and parents of students who have computer and tech needs. Older students can possibly be employed evenings and weekends paid from the fees to handle computer repairs and assistance. They can even do podcasts for DIY needs for parents and staff, etc. Depending on the workload, it can even help with city needs.

This same concept can be done with an automotive major that could include small engine repairs, as well as, motorcycles and bicycles.

Such hands on, practical job applications, would certainly attract white boys. It would be like the high schools that existed years ago in the cities that concentrated on career tracks—technical, vocational, commercial, classical, etc.

Just imagine what such charters would do to help a city impoverished area because they can also be opened nights and weekends for training activities and other assistance.

- **Issue #7-- Climate and Culture**

Developing a school climate and culture of success would be a critical component with the RR effort. These are students who have probably only known failure and many come from dysfunctional families. Therefore, It would be extremely important to recognize students who make progress academically, with improved behavior, attendance, etc. This effort can be called a RAH program (recognition, awards and honors) that can be announced at appropriate times.

Remember that these are students who probably have never been recognized for anything except misbehavior, and the parent(s) of these children have probably never heard a kind word about them in all the years they have been attending school, so they should be informed in writing when a student receives a RAH.

When appropriate, perhaps quarterly, end of year, etc. have an evening event and invite the parents; not just the parents, but brothers, sisters and grandparents and political dignitaries.

- **Issue #8--Project RAH**

The RAH program should include all employees—staff, custodians, secretaries, aides, teachers, support staff, cafeteria, etc. Too often, non-teachers are not recognized for their efforts, as well as, students.

Nominations. Anyone should be able to nominate any student or employee for a RAH recognition by filling out a simple one page form explaining why someone should be a RAH recipient. However, a nomination should not be automatic. Therefore, there should be a RAH nomination team to review each nominee to be sure it would be for a truly worthy achievement or action of some kind that contributes to the culture of the school. It certainly should not be a popularity contest.

The team could consist of the principal, two teacher reps (one academic and one non-academic), a support staff rep, and even a parent. Rotating a member or two from the team each year may be an idea to consider.

This initial team should establish clear guidelines as to the criteria to be considered for a RAH nomination.

- **Issue #9--Staff Incentives**

Staff incentives are needed for two reasons (1) to attract teachers to apply for positions in the charter and (2) to create pride that will add to the school culture. As examples, a bonus can be offered in different amounts when 80% (85%, 90%, 95%, 100%) achieve grade level. Instead of or in combination with reaching grade levels, bonuses can be provided based on significant student growth even if grade level is not reached. For example, if overall student growth exceeds 18 months or more during the year, academic staff should be recognized in some way, not necessarily a bonus, but an evening celebration at the end of the year with a nice dinner and certificates, etc.

Bonuses should be in nominal amounts with a maximum of \$ \$1,500 . Bonuses can also be offered to individual teachers whose students make significant progress academically.

However, bonus incentives can be tricky if not done fairly and this can happen if only one person makes the decision. This needs to be done objectively as possible with a central office team of 3 or so to review bonus requests from the building principal.

- **Issue #10--Unions**

The issue of unions differs according to states, but charters have helped to be successful by being free from unionization (a prime reason why New Orleans Schools were such a failure).

Failing School Issue

Since this is a critical factor in the RR Act that has been addressed, it will help to understand some of the issues involved. Although some districts or states have identified failing schools, **the problem is that there is no national criteria for determining a school as “failing.”** Such a national designation is needed, but until that happens, it must be done by the SDE or legislative action which is done by the RR Act, and it also can be done at the district level. The following references will help understand the nature of the problem and the issues involved:

The topic is discussed in “*What is a “Failing School,”*” (Diane Ravitch), HUFFPOST, 09/03/2013: “*Until the 1990s, the term was virtually unknown. About the mid-1990s, the term began appearing with greater frequency. With the passage of No Child Left Behind, the use of the expression exploded and became a commonplace.*”

Governor Andrew Cuomo (NY) recently took this idea to an extreme by saying that he wanted a ‘death penalty’ for ‘failing schools.’ He believes that when schools have persistently low test scores, they should lose democratic control and...be taken over by the state or given to a private charter school corporation...”

Note: Nice rhetoric, but why didn't he get legislation introduced to do just that?

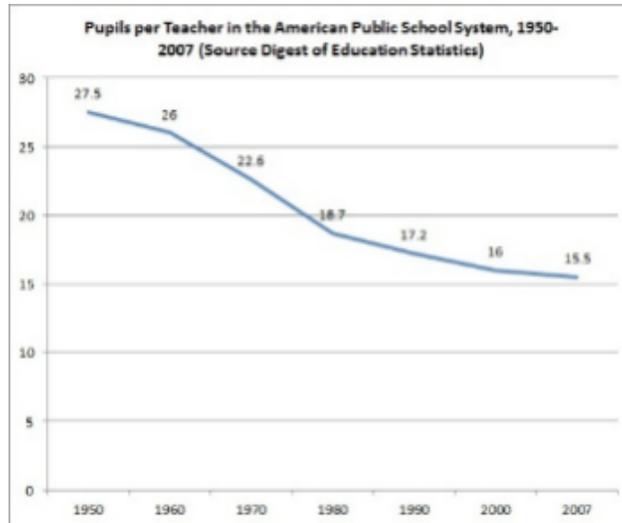
It did provide one criteria to identify a failing school, persistently low test scores. But what does that mean? What specific subject test scores, how low is low, and what would be considered persistent, one year, five years, etc.? Unfortunately, it is a general term without meaning if it does not have specific criteria.

The distinguished author goes on to state that “*what we call a ‘failing school’ is a school that lacks the personnel and resources to meet the needs of its students; ‘failing schools’ are not failing, but are schools that enroll high proportions of students who need extra help, extra tutoring, smaller classes, social workers, counselors, psychologists, and a variety of other interventions.*”

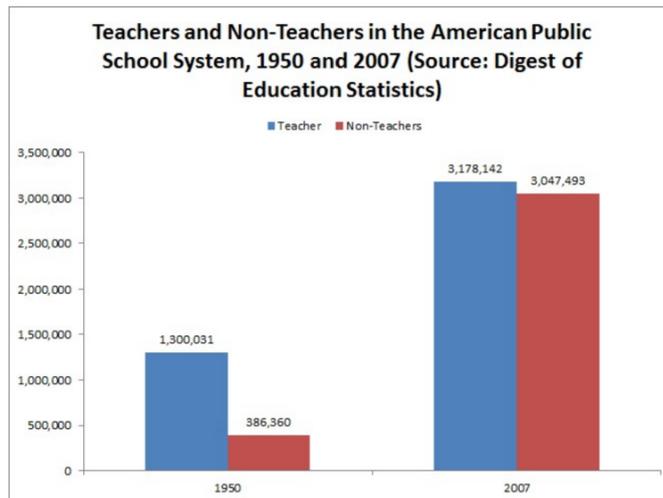
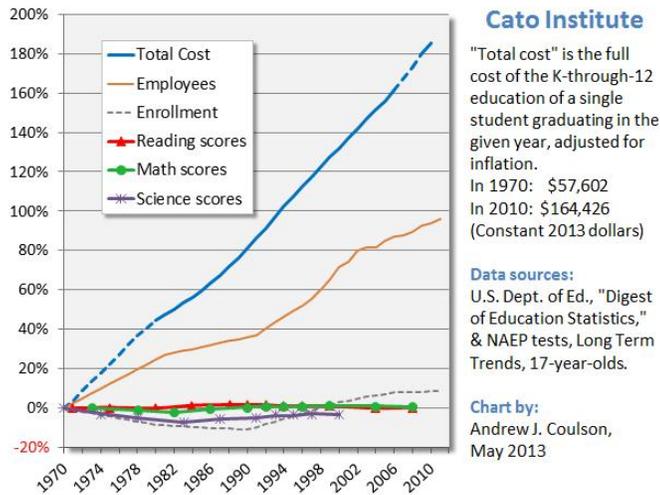
Ravitch is a well-respected educator, but she may be putting the horse before the cart. Before piling a lot of resources into the cart making it hard for the horse to push, putting effective reading instruction in front would be a simpler and wiser choice. Then when students falter in reading, additional resources can be added.

However, without specific criteria e.g. what is a small class etc.?, it would be meaningless. Nationally class sizes on average have been cut in half with absolutely no increase in test results; furthermore, more

staffing, and more dollars have likewise failed to improve scores or other school outcomes when honest criteria and math are used as the following charts show:



Trends in American Public Schooling Since 1970



In fact, the Michigan Senate Education Committee in 2001 tried to “figure out what ‘failure’ is,” and held a public hearing that demonstrated how difficult it will or could be to define a failing school in a public setting.

“Lawmakers need to know that state intervention is now being enshrined as the latest remedy of last resort for chronically low-performing districts. When school districts ‘fail,’ the state intends to come to the rescue...At the first hearing, witnesses offered a grab bag of criteria for determining what we might as well call ‘the failure standard’... Instead of drawing up a ‘failure standard’ based on an arbitrary, contradictory political consensus, lawmakers should be asking who is best qualified to define ‘failure.’ The answer is whoever has a primary incentive to see that schools do well. That’s parents, of course...”

Instead of trying to fix failure from Lansing, the legislature ought let every Michigan parent decide what constitutes a failing school by removing the barriers that prevent them from exercising their primary right and responsibility to direct the education of their children. Then maybe one day everyone will recognize failing schools as the ones nobody sends their kids to anymore.”

Sounds plausible, sensible and democratic, but not practical because it would take years to get a final answer. Also, the reality is that parents have no depth of knowledge to know what is happening in the trenches of education; their primary concern is whether their child is ‘happy’. Nevertheless, it is a topic that has generated a lot of discussion found in “***The Warning Signs of a Failing School***,” (Dr. Les Stein), *Teachthought*, 09/04/2014, that goes to an extreme in identifying criteria (not listed because it is not practical to use).

“In recent years, however, a school’s failure has often been simplistically (and almost exclusively) defined by its students’ end-of-year test results, i.e. how many students are below grade level as measured by the state’s high stakes tests in reading, math, and science. If we are serious about helping low performing schools, then it is incumbent upon our educational leaders to identify failing schools at the earliest stages of decline. As in any organization, a rapid turnaround is still possible after the problems are first identified, but once they have been allowed to fester, the turnaround not only becomes much more difficult and cumbersome, it rarely succeeds.”

Absolutely true and right on target, but to go through the list of warning signs that were listed would be too cumbersome and complicated even though it is a thoughtful list. What has to be kept in mind is that any reform of has to be scalable (easy to use by just about any school district, or schools within a district) to have a. chance for success.

Of the references reviewed, the next stands out as the most compelling, actually the most shameful, disgusting and shocking of all indicated in its title: “***Who Benefits From Failing Urban School Districts***,” (Kwix Admin), *Haberman Educational Foundation*, 11/08/2017, that analyzed 120 failed urban districts, and is based on an article by Dr. Martin Haberman in 2003:

“Failing urban school districts are now so intricately interwoven into the fabric of our social, economic and political institutions that to transform them would require changing every level of government, and since public education is the biggest business in America, simply stopping the miseducation would impact every facet of our economy. Maintaining these failing districts ensures that the present system for distributing life opportunities among the constituencies of society will remain as it is. These failing urban systems are immutable to change except in superficial ways for temporary periods

Miseducation is, in effect, a sentence of death carried out daily over a lifetime. It is the most powerful example I know of cruel and unusual punishment and it is exacted on children innocent of any crime. Most Americans avoid the personal tragedy aspect of this massive miseducation by not sending their own children to school in these failing urban districts. This includes a majority of the teachers who work in them!

*Every one of the major urban school districts suffers from a disease that might appropriately be termed **dysfunctional bureaucracy**. The districts are the carriers but never die. The children and society at large are the victims*

Dysfunctional bureaucracy sucks up most of these resources for its own enhancement before allocating a significantly diminished portion down to the schools.”

The essay is very descriptive of these urban school districts describing how one claimed 12,500 employees, but writes almost 18,000 salary checks, and how 5,000 “ghost” students disappear after the enrollment census for state aid, and on and on it goes; corruption has been happening for decades, but schools are in denial. My book, ***School Corruption: Betrayal of Children and the Public Trust 2005*** identifies these cancers in education.

What the essay illustrates is that dysfunctional urban bureaucracies that exist have a powerful negative impact on the schools that supposedly serve students. However, looking at the characteristics and elements involved in determining a “dysfunctional bureaucracy” would entail a dizzying, complex, confusing array of issues that would be impossible to evaluate objectively and reach agreement on; therefore, it should not be included.

What is discouraging to realize is that over the past 20 years (2000-2020) of various efforts to reach agreement on what constitutes a failing school, there is still no agreed criteria; perhaps school districts like it this way because it makes it very difficult to identify a failing school. ***This is why holding public hearings is a waste of time because it can only be done in a more or less private setting by a knowledgeable group of people.*** Current staff can’t do it because of conflicts of interest and this is somewhat true with the SDE. The only organization that can probably do it is the *Education Commission of the States* whose members come from all states.

Therefore, I picked a simple characteristic to evaluate a failing schools included within the RR act: *A school in which 80% of the boy students do not read at grade level*; simple and quick to determine. Of course there is a lot of latitude between 0% to 80%, so some common sense has to be applied. For example, a school that is at 79% should certainly not be closed, but rather analyzed carefully to determine of some simple fixes can be made.

A further source of interesting information is found in a 1982 book to show schools can be turned around; unfortunately, by 2020, almost 40 years later, after the elapse of 3,000,000 hours of schooling, the grim problems remain. It starts with ***“Fifteen Thousand Hours. Secondary Schools and Their Effects on Children,”*** (Michael Rutter), *Harvard University Press*, clearly illustrates what can be done, but it has not happened. Why?

A prime reason is found in *“Can a good school help its students overcome the adverse effects of economic disadvantage and family adversity? Recent educational assessment suggests that the answer may be a painful no.”* In other words **socio-economic conditions have been identified as the cause of schooling failures, and that is not accurate. Here is a book that contradicts such prevailing pessimism about the possibilities of education.**

“In a three-year study of a dozen secondary schools in a large urban area, Rutter’s team found that some schools were demonstrably better than others at promoting the academic and social success of their students. Moreover, there were clear and interesting differences between the schools that promote success and the schools that promote failure. As Rutter shows, these differences provide important clues to the kind of educational reform that might allow inner-city schools to act more uniformly as a positive and protective influence on students who must grow up in an otherwise disordered and difficult world.

*For a dozen years during their formative period of development, children spend as many of their working hours at school as at home—some 15,000 hours in all. To suggest that this tremendous amount of time has no effect on development seems irrational. **To settle for schools that simply act as institutions of containment for disadvantaged children seems a strategy of despair.** The importance of this book in education is its clear demonstration that these are not the only alternative.*

As indicated in a recent previous article there are benefits from having failing schools. They can only exist because benefits accrue from their existence! There is simply no other rational and logical

explanation. What would a business do if a factory was unproductive? It certainly would not keep it in existence. Failing schools can be closed with a simple vote by a school board, or when a district is bad enough, the state can intervene, and has intervened, and take over the system (a very political minefield); yes, it's that simple. But since this goes against the popular drumbeat that socio-economic conditions are the cause, it buries any other opposing evidence.

Consider some questions: Where are failing schools found? The cities, mostly inner cities. Politically, who controls most of the cities? Where are the school-to-prison pipelines found? Why doesn't it register on law enforcement radar (less pipeline candidates will reduce crime and cause many other reductions)? Where are teacher and other unions strongest? Where is cheap labor needed in abundance? What happens to wages when too many job applicants are well educated? Why has only one state legislated a law to find dropouts for recycling? And there are more such questions? Yes, all these may simply be coincidences or exceptions; perhaps not. You decide!

Delving into this cesspool requires the services of the *Muckraker Musketeers*; they really did exist after WWI when there were investigative journalists who uncovered corruption and were called *muckrakers*; they are rarely found now. Very interestingly, *Capital Times* has a section for readers to respond entitled, *Muck Rake!* In fact, believe it or not, the title for the column I will be doing was *The Muckraker*; but when I came across this billion to one coincidence, I felt the need to change it to *Inside Education*.

Schooling Options

Needless to say, all schools, no matter how successful will still have students and parents dissatisfied particularly if a student gets poor grades, has behavior problems and/or does not like the school offerings. Therefore, it's important for parents to know there are other options to consider, but it depends on the school district and the state they reside in. In fact, the dissatisfaction of the school is often linked to a particular teacher or the school that is fueling the stresses that cause a problem. Just changing teachers or schools may resolve the problem; yes, it can be that simple.

Seeking an internal school change is like asking for a divorce; sometimes, the first marriage may not work out, but then a second one may prove more successful because a new spouse (school or teacher) may meet needs better than the previous one. Schools are no different.

The fact is that a change of environment may resolve the problem a student has or make it more manageable. However, if it is a behavioral problem, it's critically important to first discount any possible medical issues (hearing, vision, thyroid, diabetes, etc.) and there are other possibilities such as mental health issues. A good start is with a primary care physician in order to put the medical issue at rest. However, a lot depends on how well the physician may be trained and interested in doing a full evaluation.

In exploring the various options, due diligence must be exercised because there is more than ample information to sift and sort through, but caution must be exercised with headline references or articles such as "***The Tapestry of American Public Education: How Can We Create a System of Schools Worth Choosing for All?***" Yes, it sounds like an impressive and a worthy goal except for one problem: no such system exists nor will there ever be such a system; it is a utopian concept that cannot be achieved regardless of the efforts and resources that are used. With over 50,000,000 children comprising numerous variables of sizes, shapes, colors, intelligence, genetics, medical issues, mental health problems, etc. coming from a variety of families, many dysfunctional, income levels, living conditions, etc. no one size can possibly be created to meet all needs. In fact, this is what the public school system tries to do resulting in too many failures.

A schooling option has gained much attention primarily because of COVID—homeschooling. It has gone from 5% to 10% and still growing. Very noteworthy is that parents, most with no credentials required in the public schools, teach their children who succeed and are welcomed in college and learn despite socio-economic conditions. In fact, homeschooling is a growth option with minority parents. Of course, there are other options, the most popular being charter schools.

The remaining four parts of the reading series will be covered over the next few weeks; but sadly, the volume of information will demonstrate that despite mountains of research and new knowledge over decades,

along with numerous reforms and more dollars invested to improve school outcomes for all children, nothing really changes to improve school results unless it's done through devious, unethical and corrupt ways (test cheating by teachers and administrators, lowering standards to pass and graduate students to make the graduation rates shine, falsifying school data such as the dropout rates, etc.)

Worse yet, in order to make outcomes to look good, creative math is used in abundance because the first mission of any organization is to protect its image at all costs. And when information does not enhance the image of the organization every effort will be made to cross any legal/ethical lines to discredit the information or those who expose the truth.

Review and Recommendations:

All Madison reading improvements have fallen flat and this fact does not bode well for another effort. What and who was at fault needs to be examined very carefully to prevent recycling the past mistakes. The tragedy is that all the information that was needed to "*do it right*" was available at no cost 20 years ago; and despite the School Board reform effort, the state effort, and the district effort the disastrous reading results remain. Seeking blame will simply delay new attempts, but seeking the reasons for the failures is a must in order to prevent repetition and recycling of the past.

Obviously, what needs to be done is to have an effective monitoring system in place that will provide objective oversight for any improvement efforts, as well as, tracking to see that every dollar spent is used effectively, efficiently and economically. History and reality indicates that it cannot be done internally; it can only be achieved with an unbiased and independent group.

A baby step approach was attempted with the establishment of the Citizens Advisory Group in 1998; however, since no improvements were achieved, it failed to accomplish its charge. Why did that happen? It's the same reason why it has happened in other districts with any such citizen group: failure to train the group in what to do and how to do it. How can this be done?

Forensic Audit Committee (FAC)

For 3 decades I have been advocating the establishment of *volunteer citizen forensic audit committees* to essentially *ride herd* (closely monitoring) district and school practices, procedures, and policies that would be much like that of an Inspector General (some large districts have their own IG) who provides increased accountability, promotes fiscal and program oversight, assists management in establishing and maintaining effective systems of control, and provides advice in improving district operations. However, more typically, the IG deals with problems after the fact, but if done right (having a full time district IG) would do far more. The core responsibility should be on *prevention* and monitoring. More simply put, the IG would attempt to (*nip problems in the bud*) and (2) ensure constant oversight of what is being done. This, of course, would add to school expenses, but a similar job can be done with a FAC and it would be far more objective.

Based on Madison's prior failed effort to significantly improve reading scores, this is the one recommendation that can make the difference providing it is trained in its charge. This can be done at no cost; in fact, it should be done at no cost. The size of Madison would indicate that it has the talent available particularly in its retirement population that consists of all types of skills, knowledge, experience, etc. where willing volunteers would be found to form a FAC.

I would be willing to supply all types of manuals that I have developed and training materials at no cost and assist remotely, at no cost, to provide the necessary advice as how to start and organize. The only cost involved would be to duplicate the materials needed and this certainly can be done internally with present resources.

A good way to get started to form a FAC is using the LTF as a pilot group that would concentrate on the reading issue. With a full FAC, a committee would be assigned to do that [reading] task and other similar committees are formed to address specific studies and investigations. The advantage of using the LTF as a pilot would be to start slowly and gain experience. After completing its task, the LTF can then be used as the core of a full FAC by adding other members and training components.

The LTF

*If you don't know where you are going [with a task],
how to get there (directions and training),
how do you expect to succeed?*

I am assuming, rightly I believe, that the LTF will not be receiving any needed training in what to do and how to do it; although, I certainly have given a number of suggestions in this article.

Recommendation 1: Elect a temporary chair, organize (temporarily) how the LTF will operate and function and where and when to meet.

Recommendation 2: Decide exactly what the LTF charge is--what you think you are required to do, time restrictions if any, the resources that will be needed, and exactly what's the end result that's expected. Determine whether expenses will be encountered and how they will be paid for.

Recommendation 3: Provide this information to the Board and Superintendent for clarification and approval and invite a member of the board to act as liaison.

Recommendation 4: Determine the procedure for how members will interact with school staff approved by Superintendent; ask him to assign a staff member to act as liaison between the LTF and the staff.

Recommendation 5: Reorganize and form committees to deal with specific tasks e.g. Failure Committee, Interviewing Committee, Research Committee, Survey Committee, etc.

Recommendation 5: Develop an operations manual with copies to all members and Superintendent

Recommendation 6: Each committee will need to decide how it will function and what resources it will need.

Recommendation 7: Develop working materials.

Recommendation 8: Determine what obstacles will or have been encountered and how to overcome them. (there are always obstacles)

Recommendation 9: Once all the data is collected, decide how it will be analyzed to make recommendations.

Was this done with the previous citizen group? Not likely.

To assist the LTF, I will provide 12 copies of my book, *School Pushouts: A Plague of Hopelessness Perpetrated by Zombie Schools* if the district will arrange for transportation. The books will provide a wealth of needed information.

Good Luck; it will be needed!

