



THE EFFICACY INSTITUTE

The Transformation Imperative

Awakening Professional Expertise to Achieve a Compelling Mission.

Jeff Howard, Ph.D.

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School reform has flatlined. Something more potent is in order — and American educators already have what it takes.

School reform has, for decades, taken an incremental approach. By any measure, it hasn't worked. A large percentage of our public schools, nationally, are mired in mediocrity, and those that serve the poor are much worse. Something more potent than reform is in order, and in this article, I will offer an actionable proposal for a radical *transformation* of American schools, directed by American educators themselves.

This article is targeted; it is written for the bold, stubborn spirits who still believe we can actually prepare our kids to *thrive*, even after years of enduring the institutional, bureaucratic and political inertia public school educators in the trenches face every day.

I hope to appeal to district administrators, principals and teachers, especially in underserved urban and rural areas, who have not succumbed to “that’s not realistic,” who still believe it is possible to create highly effective schools, and who are looking for an actionable framework that will turn on a light for them: “*Dammit, this could work.*”

The structure for transformation I offer comprises three essential elements:

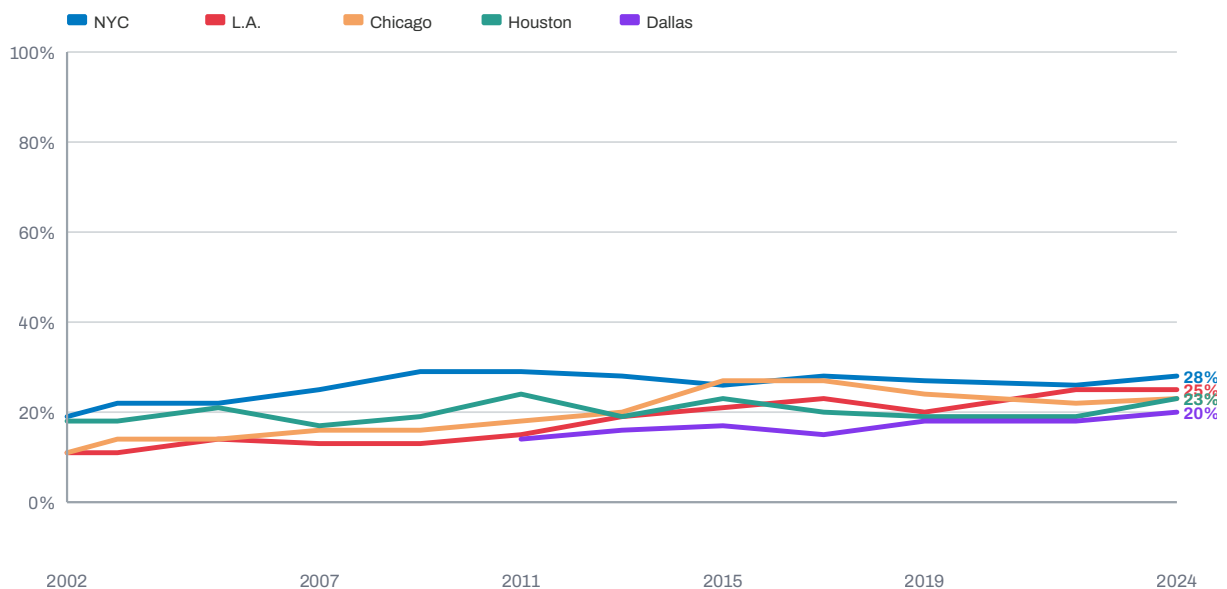
- A constructive *mindset*, that is, a system of belief that affirms the capabilities of our children and our educators and gives them confidence they can build a system that works
- A clear, compelling *mission*, that is, a set of concrete educational outcome objectives that will galvanize real commitment among serious educators because it will give our children the preparation they deserve; and
- A *method*, an operational approach designed to release, organize and focus *intelligence*—the huge, unrealized potential of our teacher corps to solve problems and reach high standards

I will organize these three elements into a coherent framework for transformation. I offer it in the hope that it might turn on that light.

The Flatline: Big Reform Initiatives, Little Change

For more than half a century, American education has been subjected to wave after wave of reform. New standards, accountability systems, curricular frameworks, instructional

strategies, authentic assessments, and professional development initiatives have all been introduced with the promise of improving outcomes and closing persistent achievement gaps. Each reform has arrived with urgency and moral conviction. Yet despite decades of effort and at least \$100 billion¹ invested, the sad results in most of our urban and rural schools remain largely unchanged.² A telling example: too many students—disproportionately those from low-income communities and historically marginalized groups—fail to achieve proficiency in 4th grade reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).³ Poor performance in elementary reading is a well-known red flag for low academic performance later. Most will reach high school graduation age (whether they *actually* graduate, or not) unprepared for college, careers, or meaningful participation in civic life.



Five Largest Urban Districts — NAEP Grade 4 Reading % At or Above Proficient (2002–2024). Source: Nation's Report Card / NAEP Trial Urban District Assessment.

As the chart above indicates, reading proficiency rates in the five largest urban districts hovered between the teens and the mid 20s between 2002 and 2024,⁴ with most showing only modest improvement during that 22 year period. That improvement essentially stalled out after 2015; reading proficiency rates in 2024 *were virtually identical to the rates 9*

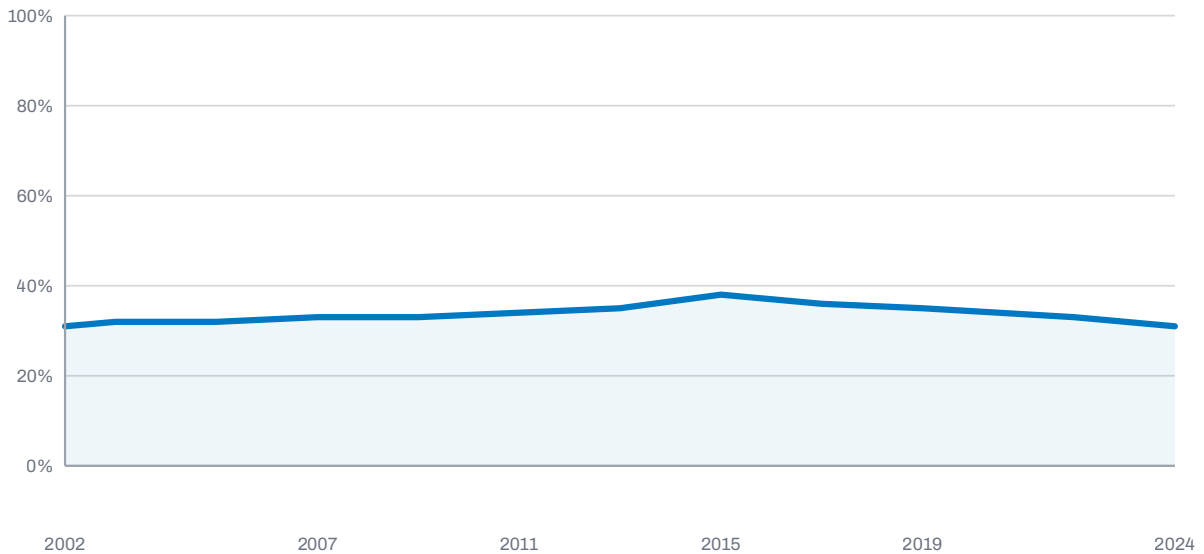
1. This a very conservative estimate that includes federal government and philanthropic reform spending over the past 40 years.

2. Recent systematic research reviews published in *Review of Research in Education* synthesize U.S. school reform evidence from the last two decades and highlight persistent limitations in outcomes from many major reform efforts. See also Charles M. Payne (2008), *So Much Reform, So Little Change*, Harvard Education Press for examination of the reasons for these disappointing results.

3. The NAEP is administered by the US Dept of Education every 2 years, in reading and math, at grades 4 and 8. It is considered the gold standard of assessments, and the “nation’s report card.”

4. Comparable district-level NAEP results for large urban systems are first available beginning in 2002, when NAEP first administered the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) to five major city school districts.

years earlier. Let us be clear: if fewer than 30% of 4th graders in our 5 largest urban districts were proficient in reading during this entire period, more than 70% were below proficiency—in the categories of “needs improvement” or “failing.” Understandable dissatisfaction with these results is reflected in superintendent turnover: NYC has had no less than 6 chancellors in this 22-year period; Los Angeles has had 6 superintendents; Chicago has had 6 CEOs; Houston has had 5 superintendents; Dallas has had 4.⁵ Presumably, all were hired with the expectation of substantially better results that none were able to produce.



National Public Schools — NAEP Grade 4 Reading % At or Above Proficient (2002–2024). After rising from 31% in 2002 to a high of 38% in 2015, the national rate returned to 31% in 2024 — back where it started. Source: NAEP.

As the chart above shows, the results for the United States as a whole were better, but not by much. After rising from 31% in 2002 to a high of 38% in 2015, the nation’s 4th graders dropped back to 31% again in 2024. These charts bring to mind a disturbing image: ***American education in the era of school reform has flatlined.***⁶ Our public schools seem mired in mediocrity.

“American education in the era of school reform has flatlined. Our public schools seem mired in mediocrity.”

JEFF HOWARD — THE TRANSFORMATION IMPERATIVE

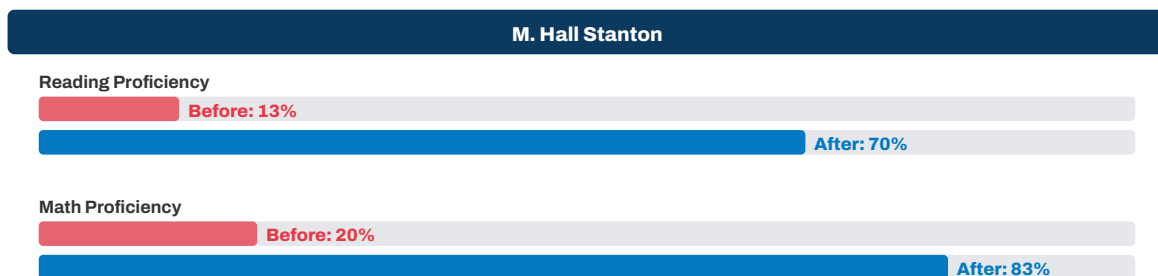
5. Results in Dallas were reported from 2011–2024 only. The other districts were reported from 2002–2024.

6. Indeed, I think these charts, which can be done for every urban district, should be called “the flatline charts.”

This persistent failure—how can we call it anything else—forces an inescapable conclusion: the problem is not insufficient reform, but a fundamentally flawed system of education and an inadequate approach to improvement. As Tyack and Cuban observed, the pattern amounts to “tinkering toward utopia”⁷—incremental reforms layered onto a flawed system, producing decade after decade of flatlined results, no matter who occupies the top job.

A Few Good Schools

But how can we be sure that the problem isn’t the limited intellectual capacities of the students who attend our public schools? The evidence is clear: there is nothing wrong with our kids. When given proper instruction, they respond with achievement of proficiency. The proof: a few schools, and occasionally entire districts, *have* produced dramatic improvements. For example:



Before-and-after: M. Hall Stanton Elementary, Philadelphia (2003–2006). Source: Karin Chenoweth, *Schools That Succeed* (2017).

- Between 2003 and 2006 students at M. Hall Stanton Elementary in Philadelphia, under the leadership of principal Barbara Adderley, improved reading proficiency on the state test from 13% to 70%, and math proficiency from 20% to 83%.⁸
- Under the leadership of principal Sue Szachowicz, Brockton High School in Massachusetts, with nearly 70% of students classified as low income, and nearly 58% from homes where English is not the first language, showed similarly spectacular results on the MCAS, the state’s highly regarded proficiency exam. Between 1998 and 2009, the percentage of Brockton students scoring proficient or advanced in English Language Arts rose 52 points, from 22% to 74%. Those failing fell from 44% to 7%.

7. David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century Of Public School Reform*. (1995)

8. Karin Chenoweth, in *Districts That Succeed* (2021), and *Schools That Succeed* (2017)

These are not historical anomalies. Here is what 2024 and 2025 data show: *The 74*, a web-based magazine focused on education policy news, offers recent dramatic examples⁹:

- “In 2024, the PUC Milagro Charter School [in Los Angeles] with 91% of its students in poverty, our calculations projected it would have a third grade reading rate of 27%. Instead, 92% of its students scored proficient or above.”
- The Hoover Street Elementary “is a traditional public school run by the Los Angeles Unified School District. With 92% of its students qualifying for free- or reduced-price lunch, our calculations suggest that only 23% of its third graders would likely be proficient in reading. Instead, its actual score was 78%.”
- “In 2024, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Elementary (PS 66) in New York City had 81% of its students qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch, yet 84% of its third graders read proficiently. It also did even better in 2025, with 71% of students with disabilities, 84% of Hispanic students and 87% of all students scoring proficiently. These rates all far surpassed the statewide average.”

And here is a famous example from nearly 50 years ago:

- When Jaime Escalante joined the faculty of Garfield High School in Los Angeles in 1974, the school was under threat of losing its academic accreditation because of chronically low test scores (prior to 1980, 10th grade reading scores were at the 5th grade level). In this atmosphere, Escalante began teaching calculus in 1978; by 1982, 18 of his students (predominantly poor and Hispanic) passed the Advanced Placement Calculus exam. In 1983 that number rose to 30 (of 33 who took the exam). By 1987, 73 Garfield students passed the calculus AP exam.¹⁰ “By 1987—only three other public schools in the nation were producing more AP calculus students than Garfield.”¹¹

But we have had less success moving entire districts. Sadly, I could not discover results for districts in the modern era nearly as impressive as gains in these few good schools. But if we go back far enough, the historical record shows us what is still possible:

- When J. Jerome Harris became superintendent of District 13 in New York City in 1974, scores on the state standardized tests were among the lowest in the city. 14 years later, District 13 students met or exceeded city averages.

’before Jerome Harris became superintendent of Community School District 13, its test scores lagged far behind those of other New York City area school systems. During his

9. The 74 is a nonprofit journalism organization covering U.S. education policy and practice, founded in 2015. www.the74million.org. These examples were cited in their November 26, 2025 and January 29, 2026 editions

10. Jerry Jesness, Stand and Deliver Revisited, in *Reason Magazine*, July 2002

11. David Hill, Stand and Deliver, Act 2, *Education Week*, March 30, 1994

tenure, the school district essentially caught up by improving its scores faster than other school systems. After Harris left, District 13 held onto most of its gains.¹²

- In 1956, Sam Shepard took over the Banneker district in the St. Louis Public Schools. The Banneker area consisted of 23 schools in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city, with a history of very low test scores.

Under Dr. Samuel Shepard's "Operation Motivation" in St. Louis's Banneker Group in 1957, reported median achievement rose over two years by eight months in reading, one year in language, and seven months in arithmetic, outpacing citywide gains; from 1957–1961 the proportion of Banneker students qualifying for the top high-school track increased from 7% to 22% while the lowest-track share fell from 47% to 10.8%.¹³

Although the early Banneker results were striking, longer term results were mixed.¹⁴ The regression, though disappointing, does not diminish the importance of the earlier gains.

These stories of individual school and whole district success remain isolated and for the most part unreplicated locally or nationally. When the great majority of urban schools and systems produce predictably weak outcomes year after year, despite clear evidence that better results are possible, the failures are no longer tolerable; they represent a call for serious people to take action.

Preparation of the next generation is perhaps the most important imperative for any society. The stakes—for individuals, for the economy, and for democracy—are simply too high to continue to endure a wretched status quo. What American education requires is not another reform cycle, but a fundamental transformation.

From Reform to Transformation

The persistent dysfunction of our public schools is grounded in a perverse mindset about the nature of intelligence, which I will describe. A transformation initiative must directly address this mindset, and correct it, as first steps. Only then can we expect people to adopt a unifying mission, and an effective operating method for change.

12. Howard Blume, *Raising Compton's Bottom Line: New Administrator Has a History of Turning Scores and Heads*, *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1994

13. U.S. Office of Education, *Operation Motivation: A Case Study of an Action Program in Elementary Education* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), ERIC ED086394; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Public School Desegregation in the North and West* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1962), 241–243.

14. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Racial Isolation in the Public Schools*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967). Although Banneker students narrowed the gap with national reading norms by the early 1960s, these gains were not fully sustained by the mid-1960s; later comparisons showed most Banneker schools again performing approximately a year or more below national averages in eighth-grade reading.

The Three M's

Transformation, to be worthy of the name, requires a coherent framework that addresses the fundamental defects of the current system. The framework I propose rests on three elements: **Mindset, Mission, and Method**. These “Three M’s” are distinct, yet interdependent levers: an empowering *mindset* about the nature and distribution of intelligence gives people a basis for believing they, and their students, have what it takes to achieve high standards; a bold *mission*, specifying clear, challenging educational outcome objectives aligned with the demands of 21st century citizenship is galvanizing, once people believe in their own capacities to meet the challenge; neither is sufficient without a *method*, an operational approach solidified in concrete organizational structure that translates belief into effective action to achieve the mission. Sustainable transformation depends upon alignment of all three.

Belief without structure is sentiment.¹⁵ Structure without belief is bureaucracy. Transformation requires both.



The Mindset: Shifting from Innate Ability to “Get Smart”

*A shift to a constructive mindset about intelligence is prerequisite for the work of transforming our schools. I don’t believe transformation can start without it, so I will take time here to describe the current, disabling mindset, and offer a formulation for a constructive mindset that can power the needed changes, and cite the science that supports it.*¹⁶

A major cause of the failure of education reform is the weak conviction, among many educators and much of the public, that anything can really be done about the condition of schools that serve the poor. This weakness is directly attributable to a disabling set of beliefs about the nature and distribution of intelligence. We don’t talk much about this in polite company—it’s considered bad form—but the way we treat children in schools is powerfully influenced by the idea of an uneven distribution of intelligence.

The Innate Ability Mindset: “Send Us Better Kids”

The dominant mindset is what I call the Innate Ability Paradigm, a deeply negative set of beliefs about intelligence, embedded in our culture, that is the most fundamental source

¹⁵. Monica Roberts-Fletcher, 2026, *Success Insights*

¹⁶. My ideas about mindsets derive from my doctoral dissertation, *The Effects of Expectancies for Reference Group Performance on Individual Performance*, Harvard University, 1980. These ideas are strongly consistent with the work of Carol Dweck, powerfully presented in a 1988 journal article, Dweck and Leggett, A Social-Cognitive Approach to Motivation and Personality, *Psychological Review*, 95; and popularized in her book, *Mindsets, the New Psychology of Success* (2006)

of our educational dysfunction. According to this mindset, academic performance is strongly determined by intelligence, which is understood to be an innate endowment, fixed at birth, and unevenly distributed among the population (and, perhaps, among different population groups). “Some have it, and some don’t.”¹⁷

Although not usually stated explicitly, this idea is very close to the surface. When a colleague of mine proposed that teachers in an urban school embrace a high standard of proficiency for all their students, one teacher replied: “If you want better outcomes for the kids in this school, send us better kids.”¹⁸ Another example: at a speaking engagement to a large audience of California school administrators several years ago, I took the podium and paused, mute, for a very uncomfortable 30 seconds. When I was sure I had everyone’s attention (“Is something wrong with this guy?”) my first words were: “When it comes to intelligence, **some have it—**” I then cupped my hand behind my right ear, as a sign I wanted the audience to finish the sentence. In unison, virtually all in attendance called out: “*and some don’t.*” I replicate this scene with just about every group of educators I speak to; they are all able to finish the sentence. “For educators,” I tell them, “that is very deadly knowledge.”



“If you want better outcomes for the kids in this school, send us better kids.” — An urban-school teacher

Our failures should not be attributed to lazy or inadequate teachers. Most educators work hard, care deeply about their students, and enter the profession with a genuine desire to make a difference. But the idea that American students occupy positions on a distribution (or “bell curve”) of intelligence is second nature, unquestioned by most Americans, including educators who have been exposed to this mindset throughout their lives and careers. It generates a tolerance for a system of structures, schedules, curricula, and expectations that disable teachers and students alike, virtually guaranteeing the flatlined outcomes we see. We are mired in this culture of disbelief.¹⁹

This idea of a fixed distribution of intelligence, with fully half our students “below average,” explains why American schools have operated as a sorting system where children are

17. The distribution is reputed to follow the model of the “bell curve,” where half the population is regarded as “above average” in intelligence, and the other half, of course, below average.

18. This story came from Sandy Gilmore, my colleague and partner at the Efficacy Institute for more than 30 years.

placed, early and usually permanently, in one of three “ability groups.”²⁰ A few are regarded as highly intelligent (or “gifted and talented”), expected to be able to learn an advanced curriculum, and learn quickly. Most hover around the average; they are given a more restricted curriculum and expected to learn more slowly. And some are judged to be of limited intelligence, to learn much more slowly, and given a curriculum reflecting these limitations. Students know who has been placed in which group, and what it means. For them, the labels signify one’s status as very smart, sort of smart, or kinda dumb (I like the directness of these labels, which I shorten to VS, SS, and KD). For the SS’s and KD’s, low expectations are rationalized as realism, and failure to achieve high standards *is expected*, attributable to student deficits rather than to instructional or organizational shortcomings.

The Innate Ability Paradigm offers educators and systems a useful escape hatch. If students fail, it is because they lack ability; the system itself bears little responsibility (“what do you expect *us* to do?”). Students themselves lose any sense of efficacy; those placed in the lower groups internalize negative judgments about their abilities and learn to interpret initial difficulty as evidence of inadequacy rather than as a normal part of learning (imagine if very young children learning to walk and talk had the same mindset). The result is a self-reinforcing cycle of discouragement, giving up at the first sign of difficulty, underachievement, and erosion of confidence.

Perhaps the most essential feature of the innate ability mindset is its disabling influence on effort. If my difficulties are due to deficient abilities, then increased effort, or any effort at all, is futile (“why bang my head against a wall?”). Children in the lower ability groups learn this deadly logic from an early age.

The Get Smart Mindset (GSMS)

We need something better. A constructive, confidence-building belief system about intelligence is required if we are to muster the will to transform our schools. The alternative is the **Efficacy**, or **Get Smart**, mindset—the reframing of a simple truth wise humans have always understood: *skills and capabilities, including intellectual capabilities, are developed through sustained effort*. This understanding rests on the simple, powerful assumption that has always guided effective teachers: intelligence is dynamic, not fixed; it *grows* in response to tenacious engagement of effort at challenging activity.

19. Notwithstanding the work of the Efficacy Institute, Carol Dweck’s writings on Mindset, and a few other efforts, we have not really succeeded in dislodging this negative mindset.

20. There is a clear distinction between groupings that represent judgements about abilities, and what might be called “achievement groups,” used by teachers to differentiate instruction to students entering the year at different levels of performance. The later are an instructional tool reflecting different current needs, not a permanent judgement about ability.

At the psychological level, confidence is the essential starting point. Children must be explicitly taught to believe that effort is the reliable basis for improvement and eventual mastery in school—that they can trust that their effort will matter.²¹ This confidence activates what I call *effective effort*, which consists of three interrelated components:

THE ADULT MODEL

Confidence → Effective Effort → Development

FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN²²

Think You Can → Work Hard → Get Smart

- *Tenacious engagement* with challenging work, especially after difficulty
- *Focused attention to feedback* about performance: “What am I good at already; what do I need to work on to improve?”
- *Strategy formulation* based on the feedback: “What will I do differently, based on what the feedback is telling me?”

Commitment of this kind of effort is what successful people have always done, in the full range of human learning activities. People who lack the confidence to commit their effective effort inevitably fail to achieve their potential.

The good news is that the Get Smart Mindset, with its emphasis on the essential element of effective effort, is both learnable and teachable. It can be taught to children early in their lives, and it is, in fact, taught to *some* children, in some families, and in the subcultures of some successful population groups from early childhood.²² Then these children are guided in their practice of effective effort, in all the learning challenges placed before them.

People do become more intelligent as they respond to challenge with effort—they *get smarter*. But we must not take lightly the discouraging effects of failure and difficulty, which must be overcome to sustain effective effort. Contrary to what happens in most of our classrooms, *children can be affirmatively taught that difficulty, which is inevitable as they take on new learning challenges, is not the basis of a judgement about ability; it is simply feedback—information about what changes in intensity or strategy are needed to improve*. This is a liberating notion, immunizing children (and adults) from negative psychological con-

21. This idea is captured in the model I have long used in my work with educators: Confidence—Effective Effort—Development

22. We searched for a way to express the model to younger children, in simpler language. My colleague Verna Ford came up with this: Think You Can—Work Hard—Get Smart

sequences associated with initial difficulty and failure. I summarize this essential shift with the acronym **FADAF—Failure And Difficulty Are Feedback**. Learning accelerates when mistakes are no longer associated with frustration and shame (“I’m just not smart enough—”) but analyzed and used as a guide to get better (“What must I work on to improve?”). FADAF, like the GSMS, is learnable and teachable—and it applies as powerfully to educators analyzing instructional challenges as it does to students working through difficult problems.

FADAF—Failure And Difficulty Are Feedback: learning accelerates when mistakes are analyzed as a guide to get better, not treated as evidence of fixed limits.

Great teachers already operate from this mindset, without the need for exposure to the conceptual language I use here. The archetypal “teacher in room 206,” who routinely produces academic results that defy demographic predictions, has learned from experience to build students’ confidence, to explicitly teach them that effort is essential to learning, and to normalize struggle as a necessary and productive part of growth. During presentations to educators, I often describe “206” in this way, and ask how many know, or know of such a teacher. In almost every instance, more than half raise their hands. The challenge before us is not “discovering” what the 206’s of the world already know, but distributing and institutionalizing that knowledge so that it becomes the norm rather than the exception.²³

Neuroplasticity: The Scientific Foundation of Efficacy

The GSMS is grounded in modern neuroscience, specifically, in the science of **neuroplasticity**. Neuroplasticity refers to the brain’s capacity to change its structure and function in response to committed practice, or sustained effort. It offers proof that sustained effort boosts learning by physically reshaping neural networks.²⁴ When individuals engage in effortful practice, synaptic connections strengthen, new pathways form, and existing circuits become more efficient, often very quickly. These changes are observable and measurable. Importantly, they occur across the lifespan. It is fortunate, for our drive for transformation, that the brain remains adaptable in this way well into adulthood and even old age—you *can* teach old(er) humans new tricks.²⁵

23. I think of my work at the Efficacy Institute as development of a conceptual language that facilitates transmission of these understandings and practices, expanding their use.

24. Michael M. Merzenich, *Soft-Wired: How the New Science of Brain Plasticity Can Change Your Life* (San Francisco: Parnassus Publishing, 2013).

The reality of neuroplasticity carries profound implications for teachers and district administrators. Persisting in practices such as ability grouping that implicitly communicate fixed, unevenly distributed learning capacity, is not only demotivating—it is scientifically indefensible. A system that truly embraces neuroplasticity must align its standards, expectations, instruction, assessment, and professional culture with the reality that the great percentage of our students do, in fact, have the capacity to reach high standards of learning—if we can engage their effective effort.

This is hard science that directly refutes the Innate Ability Paradigm. More important, it explains the successes of our best teachers and parents and offers a basis for replicating their successes. Simply put, normal human brains are designed to learn, and effective teachers know how to support the tenacious engagement, focus on feedback, and strategy formulation that propel the neural changes that underlie and accelerate learning. The Get Smart Mindset aligns with how the brain actually works.



“Just as muscles grow stronger with exercise, your brain gets smarter with sustained effective effort.”

THE CLASSROOM TRANSLATION OF NEUROPLASTICITY

In the classroom, neuroplasticity is teachable in plain terms: “Just as muscles grow stronger with exercise, your brain gets smarter with sustained effective effort.”



The Mission: College and Career Readiness

It has long been established that specific, challenging goals have powerful effects, producing stronger effort, persistence, and better performance than vague goals, or no explicit goals at all.²⁵ But school reform efforts have seldom (if ever) been organized around anything more concrete and challenging than a vague aspiration for “improvement.”

Why would this be so? There is a deep aversion, almost a taboo, associated with setting concrete goals for education. Many people seem to regard declaring clear outcome objectives, such as “by year end, 90% of 5th graders will score at the proficient level in mathem-

25. Lövdén, M., et al. (2013). Structural brain plasticity in adult learning and development.

26. Locke and Latham, A Practically Useful Theory of Goal Setting, *American Psychologist* (2002)

atics,” as vulgar, mechanistic, a violation of the higher calling of human service: “human beings are not widgets subject to production quotas!” I get this, I think; children are not widgets. But they do need to be educated to the specific standards required for success in our society, and the adults responsible for them ought to be accountable for something measurable.

I believe the cultural overlay of the Innate Ability Mindset creates a brick wall of disbelief that blocks all efforts to set outcome objectives in our education systems. Any talk of moving a critical mass of students, especially poor and minority students, to standards aligned with the requirements of success in society runs aground on the unspoken question: “*But what if they can’t do it?*” If you have accepted the idea that only a small minority of children are smart enough to reach high standards, the idea of educator accountability for getting a large majority there, including those in our inner cities, seems unrealistic and unfair. Doubts about the intelligence of our children are the deeper reason for the aversion to concrete objectives.

Aversion to concrete goals will stop any real transformation effort in its tracks. We can’t transform education without clear objectives, aligned with the demands of a dynamic society. But we can’t set appropriate objectives because we lack confidence our students can achieve them. This is a box we must escape. The GSMS offers a way out. The aversion to clear outcome objectives dissolves in the face of neuroscience; if virtually all our children can learn to high standards in environments that structure their effective effort, then how can we continue to avoid setting concrete objectives for educating them?

Allow me to offer a clear, challenging objective as the Mission for K-12 education:

Within 5 years, 90% of our students will graduate from high school at a rigorous standard of College and Career Readiness (CCR).

A SIMPLE DEFINITION OF CCR:

A student is considered ready for college and career if [by the end of high school] they can qualify for and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses or career-oriented training programs without needing remedial coursework.²⁷

A 90% CCR mission is rigorous and bracingly concrete. It rejects vague aspirations and replaces them with a measurable definition of success, aligned with the requirements of effective participation in our society.²⁸ I believe this goal is eminently realistic. Our chil-

27. Locke and Latham, *A Practically Useful Theory of Goal Setting*, *American Psychologist* (2002)

dren certainly have the intellectual capacity; the only limiting factor is the efficacy of adult efforts to transform our schools.

It is essential to note that this mission gives direction to educators at all levels; students can only achieve CCR if they have reached standards of proficiency in all essential subjects at every grade level leading up to high school graduation. *CCR, in effect, is the culmination of a **progression** of proficiencies, and thus requires full participation of educators at all levels if it is to be achieved.*

The call to achieve 90% CCR and the proficiencies that lead to it raises a fundamental question: are we serious about using schooling to prepare young people for the world they will face, and will we do what's necessary to accomplish it? In a system without a clearly defined, well aligned standard of success, a high school diploma signifies little more than compliance with seat-time requirements. A mission of 90% CCR gives meaning and relevance to our education program by defining success as demonstration of readiness to meet the standards of a dynamic society.

The Method: Mobilizing Professional Expertise

Mindset and Mission define what achievements people regard as possible, and what they think is important enough to commit to. Method describes the operational approach people use to accomplish their objectives.

Two Dominant Approaches

Our current methods have not worked; two dominant reform approaches, top-down reform mandates and the best practices model, have failed to produce sustained, system-level gains in student achievement.

Top-down reform mandates from schools of education, education reform consultants and/or central office administrators focus on curriculum reforms, new instructional strategies and various programs and processes, each imposed from above. Top-down reform is modest in its aspirations. It typically does not specify clear, measurable academic outcome objectives beyond vague expectations of “improvement.” It employs accountability measures focused on process rather than outcomes (“show us you have implemented the program”).

This approach tends to stifle professional judgment and ownership because it treats educators as implementers of someone else's solutions, rather than as thinkers and profes-

sional problem-solvers. Many districts impose new mandates each year, which produce more resentment among educators than actual change in student outcomes. Top-down mandates have come to be regarded by many educators as fundamentally disrespectful and are disdainfully referred to as “flavors of the month.”

The second established approach, **the best-practices model**, assumes that improvement will spread organically as educators are exposed to and encouraged to adopt techniques observed in high-performing classrooms. The best-practices model prioritizes research-validated skills considered essential to expert teaching. It can be presented in workshops followed by extended and frequent feedback and coaching, long-term, as an important component of career development.²⁹

Best practices is more respectful of educators and has an understandable appeal; it can represent a well-researched toolkit at their disposal. But the book gets thicker every year, and that can be overwhelming for the typical classroom teacher. It is typically disconnected from concrete academic objectives, with results reported as degrees of improvement, rather than achievement of clear outcome objectives. This approach has not, therefore, been a driver of system transformation.

So what *will* work?

The Awakening: Mobilization of Professional Expertise (MPE)

Major advances in human development occur when, in response to the pressures of crisis or competition, human intelligence is mobilized—organized, structured and focused to produce new ideas and innovations and, occasionally, durable new systems. Pressure stimulates intelligence to organize, and the current failure of our schools puts pressure on us all.

We need not continue to wait for the smart people in our schools of education to give us the recipe for transformation. The intelligence we need for that is already at hand; but it is currently isolated, disconnected, like brain cells full of potential but not yet organized into working neural networks. Mobilizing Professional Expertise is the operating approach I am offering to build the connections; to organize the intelligence of experienced professional educators, amplify and focus it on the challenge of achieving the Mission. It is a model I believe has significant advantages: it has already *proven* its effectiveness on smaller scales; is *available* to any district or school that chooses to use it; and is *inexpensive*

28. CCR is certainly challenging enough to kick-start transformation, but it should not be considered the final, or ultimate ambition. I propose it only as a Phase 1 objective. Once we achieve it, a succession of more advanced objectives will come into focus, and we can turn the organization already in place toward them.

29. Jon Saphier, Mary Ann Haley-Speca, and Robet Gower, *The Skillful Teacher*, Research for Better Teaching, 2025

because it relies on awakening capabilities already present in schools to meet ambitious academic objectives. Here is a definition:

Mobilizing Professional Expertise is the deliberate process of building a culture and structures that organize the intelligence, experience, and creativity of educators in service of **College and Career Readiness**, and the successive proficiencies that lead to it.

MPE is where belief hardens into structure.

Results-Focused Teams

The working mechanism for Mobilizing Professional Expertise is Results-Focused Teams (RFTs), which I regard as an evolutionary elaboration on the older concept of Professional Learning Communities.³⁰ *Think of Results Focused Teams as PLCs with a mission: they laser focus on the concrete target of grade-level proficiency, using evidence of student performance to adapt instruction and policy to achieve it.* RFTs do not offer off-the-shelf strategies or demand compliance; instead, they organize educators into empowered working groups and charge them with the professional responsibility of *figuring out what to do and how to do it.* There is an important cultural element to MPE and RFTs: professional educators are valued and treated with respect—they are conferred both the authority and responsibility to organize instruction in their schools and classrooms to achieve the Mission. **Empowered, data-driven RFTs are the engines of transformation.** Every RFT decision faces one acid test: *does this strategy move students toward proficiency, or not?*

Research on successful schools makes one thing clear: *in schools that get results, educators do not work alone.*³¹ Isolation is replaced by structured collaboration—organized intelligence—focused on learning to a standard. Here is the central insight that underlies MPE: *our essential problem is not a deficit of talent; it is a failure to awaken that talent, organize it into empowered collectives, and focus it on a shared mission.*

30. PLCs have come to be regarded as “compliance rituals” in many circles. At the urging of several readers, I have replaced that nomenclature with “Results-Focused Teams,” a term that better captures my meaning, coined for this paper by my colleague Kim Marshall.

31. Vescio, V., Ross, D., & Adams, A. A Review Of Research On The Impact Of Professional Learning Communities On Teaching Practice And Student Learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 2008



“Our essential problem is not a deficit of talent; it is a failure to awaken that talent, organize it into empowered collectives, and focus it on a shared mission.”

JEFF HOWARD

Get Started! A Framework for Executing MPE

The transformation process, relying as it must on the expertise of professional educators, cannot be dictated, *but it must be effectively managed*. It is a process of orchestrating a fundamentally new kind of organization, with a new professional culture and new organizational structures, to support transformation and the drive for student proficiency. The new organization will require senior leadership that demonstrates flexibility, creativity, openness and clear expressions of respect.

The Superintendent Is Primary. *The notion of Mission-focused district transformation is meaningless without the unambivalent commitment and engagement of the leader.* The Superintendent “walks the talk,” demonstrating commitment through action. They:

- **Lead the Shift to the Get Smart Mindset.** A professional development campaign to establish the GSMS (and aligned instructional practices) among educators is the first order of business for the transformation initiative, and educators will look to the superintendent for validation: “Does he/she walk the talk?”
- **Use Statistics to Generate an “Irrefutable Logic.”** The superintendent publishes the “flatline charts”—the district’s record of unacceptably low reading and math proficiency for at least the last 10 years.³² The leadership team then publishes and workshops data to show evidence that *some* schools and classrooms in the state,³³ and some classrooms in the district’s own schools, show much stronger performance. This represents clear evidence that “students like ours” are fully capable of achieving at much higher levels. Present the data at the school board, at principals meetings, school faculty meetings, and *encourage vigorous discussion of the implications*.

The combination of these two data sets—the flatline charts and the positive exceptions—represents an irrefutable logic (“If students like ours can do it, does that not mean that our

32. These charts should be patterned after the charts on page 2 of this document.

33. State Departments of Education, who administer state proficiency tests, can provide data on schools in the state that perform substantially beyond expectation.

students are capable of it, too?”), and a moral wake-up, an ethical choice, a call to action. With this evidence, the superintendent confronts educators with the choice: “Our students are capable of much, much better than what we’re getting. Can we really continue to accept low performance from our schools, when others do so much better? Can there be any doubt of our obligation to build an effective education process to raise them to a much higher standard?”

- **Publicly Declare the Mission.** Next, having set the stage, culturally and psychologically, the superintendent publicly declares Grade-Level Proficiencies leading to 90% College and Career Readiness as the Mission of the district and its individual schools and classrooms. The announcement should be dramatic, and the outreach broad—at a school board meeting, an all-hands meeting with educators, at community meetings, and parent convenings. To win the commitment of all stakeholders, the declaration must be logically compelling, unambivalent and uncompromising. In the announcement, explain that children’s futures depend on it, that they are fully capable of achieving it, and that, therefore, “it is our responsibility to get them to this standard.”³⁴
- **Reshape the Budget.** The superintendent takes responsibility for budget and resource allocation decisions to support new organizational structures, new policies, programs and instructional practices that emerge from the transformation initiative.
- **Establish “The Superintendent’s Mobilizing Professional Expertise (MPE) Support Team.”** This team is the structural representation of MPE. It carries out the superintendent’s mandate to reshape school culture and practice around the GSMS and the Mission of grade-level proficiency and CCR. *It becomes the central operating unit of the district in its drive to achieve the Mission.*

The Superintendent’s MPE Support Team Gets Busy

The superintendent establishes an essential new structure, “The Superintendent’s MPE Support Team,” led by a deputy superintendent, designed to support the **Results Focused Teams (RFTs)** charged with policy and instructional innovations. The Support Team:

- **Conducts a school-by-school campaign for educator adoption of the Get Smart Mindset.** Teachers’ belief in the capabilities of their students to achieve proficiency is essential. The Support team uses the “irrefutable logic,” research-based evidence, and educators’ own experiences to facilitate the shift to internalization of the GSMS.
- **Organizes Data-Driven Results-Focused Teams.** Empowered, data driven RFTs with clear outcome objectives are the engines of transformation. The Support Team facilit-

34. See the “Stakeholder Pitch” PowerPoint presentation we offer as a template for this presentation

ates the process of organizing teachers in schools, and administrators at all levels into RFTs focused on the Mission. The Support Team:

- Shares the research demonstrating that effective RFTs are structured, data-driven, and focused on instructional effectiveness.³⁵
- Organizes a system to provide common assessments to generate useful district, school building and classroom data.
- Supplies RFTs with tools, such as the Efficacy *Self-Directed Improvement System (SDIS)*, and its operational subsystem, *the Data/Feedback/Strategy Method (D/F/S)* to translate the data into meaningful feedback that guides improvement-focused action.³⁶
- Artificial Intelligence is likely to be an extremely useful tool for district transformation. The Support Team ensures that: teacher RFTs have access to latest guides for using AI in the classroom to save time and improve instruction³⁷; and that administrative RFTs have access to the most effective AI applications for (for example), data analysis and progress reporting, streamlining scheduling and logistics, and reviewing and drafting mission-focused policies.³⁸
- With the superintendent's blessing, the Support Team grants RFTs the authority to define problems and find solutions, with administrator RFTs focused on district policies that support good instruction,³⁹ and teacher RFTs focused on effective classroom instruction. The Support Team confers authority to choose what works and eliminate what doesn't as people pursue Mission objectives.⁴⁰
- **Identifies Professional Development Needs in RFTs.** Achieving the mission will require high expertise teaching from the entire teaching staff, and new organizational leadership skills from administrators. The Support Team encourages and supports people to reach out to the available knowledge base as they discover additional skills they need⁴¹ as a natural part of the RFT process.
- **Cultivates Network Effects.** Borrowing a military term, the professional collaboration that defines RFTs is a *force multiplier*; effective working groups represent networks where collective intelligence exceeds the sum of individual insights. Completely new understandings, ideas and practices *emerge* from professional interaction. The Support Team should amplify this effect by facilitating communication between RFTs at differ-

35. DuFour and Eaker, (1998), *Professional Learning Communities at Work*; and Haack and Marshall, (2021), *How PLCs Can Get Better at Using Student Data*

36. See the link in the Field Guide for District Transformation

37. Juan Garzón, Eddy Patiño & Camilo Marulanda (2025). "Systematic Review of Artificial Intelligence in Education: Trends, Benefits, and Challenges." *Multimodal Technologies and Interaction* 9(8), 84.

38. Satyadhar Joshi (2025). Strategic Integration of Artificial Intelligence in U.S. K-12 Education: A Comprehensive Review and Policy Roadmap (Preprints.org).

39. Meredith I. Honig and Colleagues (2010), Central Office Transformation for District Wide Teaching and Learning Improvement, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University Of Washington College of Education

40. Reeves, D.B. (2007). Closing the Implementation Gap. Published Online via Creative Leadership Solutions/ASCD

41. Jon Saphier, *Disrupting the Teacher Opportunity Gap: Aligning 12 Processes for High Expertise Teaching*, Corwin, 2023

ent grade levels, in different buildings, and at different levels of the organization—effectively creating 2nd order RFTs—so that everyone works with a whole-system perspective. By organizing educators into networked RFTs, entire school systems become *learning organizations* capable of continuous improvement.

- **Spreads the Wealth.** The Support Team creates a library, or catalogue, to capture generalizable new policies and instructional practices that emerge from RFTs, for introduction across the district.
- **Aligns the Teacher Evaluation Process.** The Support Team ensures that teacher evaluation is well aligned with the focus on student proficiency. Evaluation is used to reinforce effective teaching practices and provide feedback to improve mediocre ones.⁴²
- **Reports Progress.** The Support Team continually monitors and presents evidence of progress. It is essential that everyone is provided with a regular flow of data about student performance, and about variation in rates of improvement between different classrooms and different schools once the transformation initiative has commenced. The Support Team never uses comparative data to shame people, but to prompt them to generate strategies in their RFTs to “reduce variation.” When they can see the data on progress and variation, RFTs represent a mechanism to “level-up” performance across schools and entire districts to reflect the proven capabilities of children and educators.

Recap: Mobilizing Intelligence for Transformation

I understand the importance of character development as an objective of K-12 education, but the focus of this paper is narrower. The foundational premise of the Transformation Imperative is that school districts must embrace, as their first priority, movement of children to Grade-Level Proficiency and College and Career Readiness. All elements of the district’s culture, structure and operations must be aligned with that Mission. Achieving alignment is the responsibility of the superintendent and leadership team.

The Transformation Imperative distills down to four essential propositions:

- **Our students are capable of achieving whatever standards we set before them.** Virtually all of them. There is nothing wrong with our children. The GSMS is the truth.
- **Educators who embrace the Mission of Proficiency and CCR can organize instruction to get them there.** The expertise exists in your buildings right now. It just needs to be mobilized, and focused.
- **Difficulty is feedback, not evidence of fixed limits.** Failure And Difficulty Are Feedback — FADAF — for students learning their lessons, and for school leaders organizing an ef-

42. Kim Marshall, *Rethinking Teacher Supervision and Evaluation*, Jossey-Bass, 2013

fective education program. Failure and difficulty are just information to focus our attention on what we need to work on to improve.

- **The district must be structured for continuous, evidence-based movement toward the Mission.** Piecemeal reform is no longer acceptable. Tolerance of continuing organizational failure represents, inescapably, moral failure.

We need an empowering belief—the GSMS, *and* a corresponding structural mechanism—RFTs at all levels facilitated by the MPE Support Team.

Belief without structure is sentiment. Structure without belief is bureaucracy. Transformation requires both.

We have reason for hope. The American teacher corps is a sleeping giant. Their latent transformational potential is unrealized only because education leaders have not yet embraced a formula for unlocking it. When you network educators who have internalized the GSMS, give them a compelling Mission and entrust them with the authority to shape instruction and policy, you release their intelligence, motivation and creativity. This is the formula, and for education leaders, this is the job. It will require a fundamentally new approach to school system management and organization, and leadership that walks the talk.

I have offered **the Three M's** as the comprehensive formula for the change we need. They can be simply summarized as three simple directives:

Shift the Mindset: Reject the idea of innate, fixed intelligence; shift to the GSMS

Declare the Mission: Grade-Level Proficiency and CCR

Establish the Method: Mobilize Professional Expertise through Results-Focused Teams

Leaders have to lead. All of us involved in public education, from superintendents to master teachers, union heads and board chairs, from parent leaders to education school professors and consultants, are at this moment faced with the question: *are we serious?* Will we do what is necessary to transform our schools and classrooms into engines for development of our children, or not?

Are we *serious*?

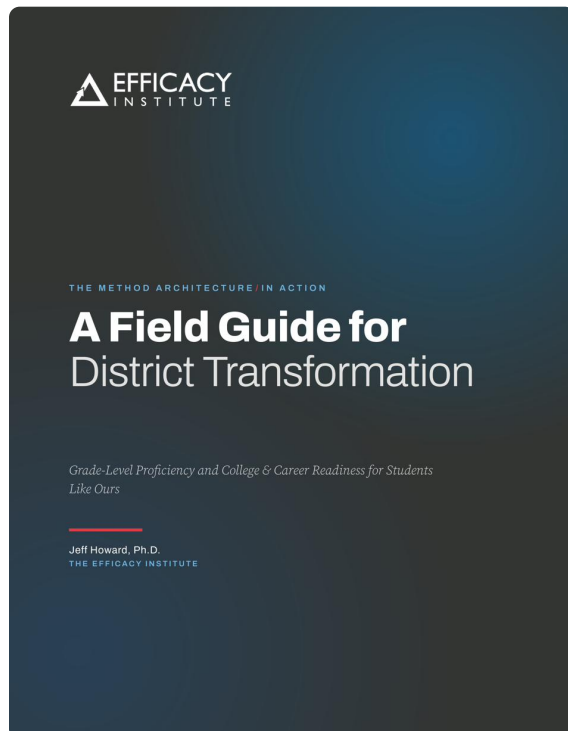


Start Here

If this argument moved you—if you found yourself nodding, or arguing back, or thinking about your own flatline chart—don't let it end here. Belief without structure is sentiment. It's time to build the structure.

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