

School Improvement Issues For High-Poverty Schools: Year 1, Part 1

By Ruby K. Payne, PhD

This is the first article in a three-part series. The second article in the series (in the March issue) will look at Year 2 of school improvement.

In December 2016 the U.S. federal government released a research report indicating Race to the Top, the \$7 billion program for education, had made *no difference* in student achievement. Eight years basically lost for many students.

I was not surprised. I had predicted that result when it started.

So why did it not work? Because the basic realities of high-poverty schools and students from poverty were ignored. More than half of all children in public schools now come from poverty.

What are the basic issues that must be addressed?

Issue #1 is time.

Although many students from poverty come to school 2–3 years behind, schools all too often are expected to catch the student up in one year. To do that, time has to be viewed very differently. Time is one of the most valuable commodities, and it has to be leveraged.

There are four kinds of time to track.

a. The entire school year. Take a school calendar for the whole

year. Cross off July. Put a diagonal line on August because you have only half that month to accomplish anything because everyone is trying to get school started. September and October are good. Put a diagonal line through November because Thanksgiving actually starts mid-month. Put an X on December. Very little of significance will get done. Put a diagonal on January; you are starting a new semester. February and March are good. April starts testing, and staff is grumpy (another diagonal). Put an X on May, with the finish line looming for students and teachers. In June only the omnivores come back for training.

So, basically you have three months in the fall and three months in the spring to get true staff-embedded training and conversation. Given those three months each semester, decide how that time will be spent *before* the year starts. Get it on the calendar. *As a principal you have to know what you can realistically get done in one year. This allows you to focus on the most important tasks.*

b. Payoff of time. For the amount of time you spent on content or a strategy—or *anything* you did—was there a payoff? In other words, did you get the amount of

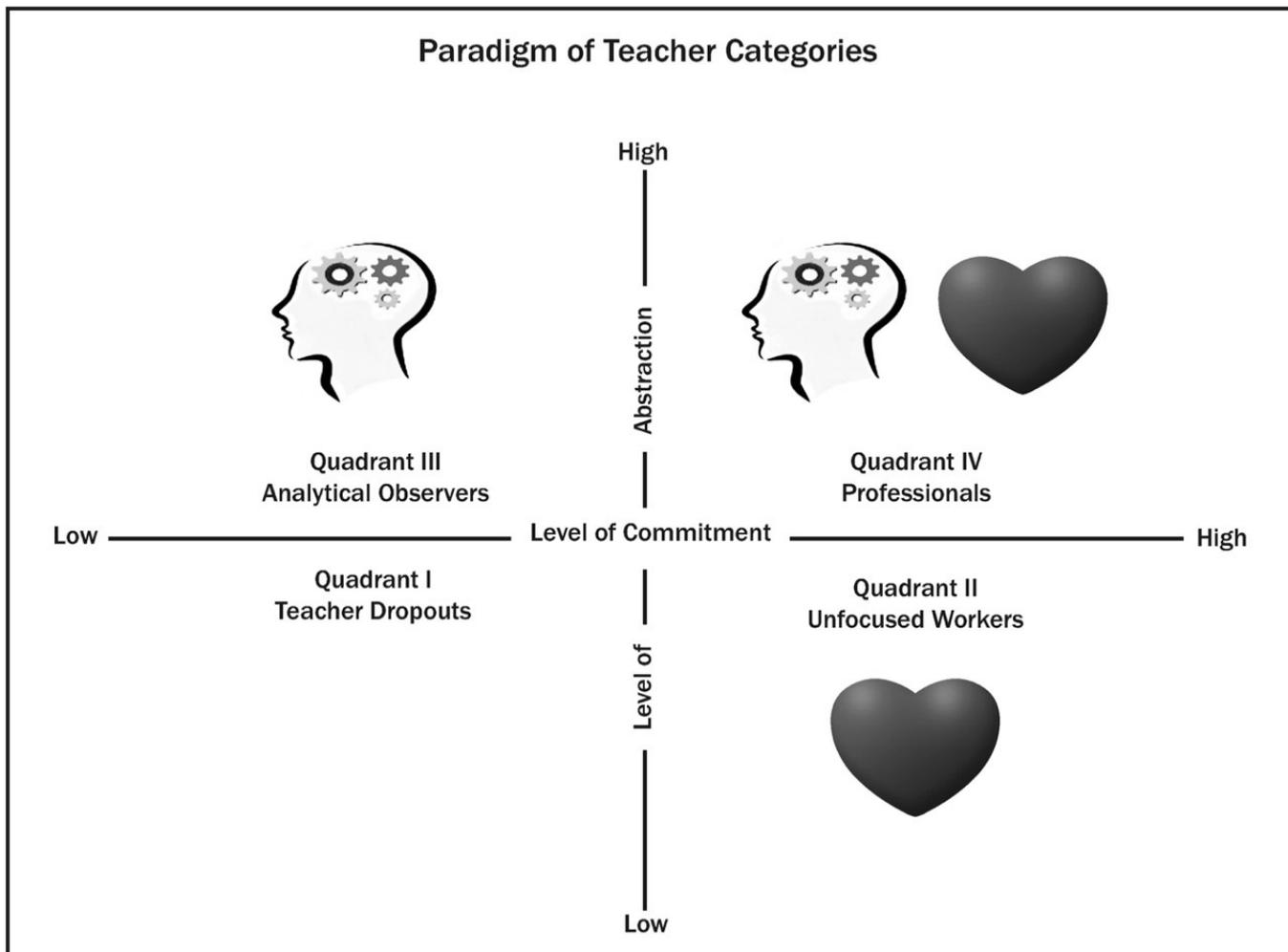
growth expected for the amount of time dedicated to it? Use John Hattie's work on effect size to determine if there is a payoff for time investment. (At aha! Process we have a new edition of a book called *Research-Based Strategies*¹ that tells you the effect size for every strategy. Some strategies get 2–3 years of growth in one year. Those are the ones you want!)

c. The six weeks/nine weeks. Time as measured by formative assessments and grades. Did the expected amount of learning occur in that time frame?

d. How the principal's time is spent. What are the essential priorities to address that have the highest time payoff?

Issue #2 is staff.

Most high-poverty schools have greater staff turnover, and a significant percentage of staff members are beginning teachers. How do you begin to structure your staff so you manage the capacity and experience of the staff? Many principals think the way to do this is to coach individual teachers. You don't, however, have enough



time to do that. While teacher observation is important, it isn't where you'll find the greatest payoff in terms of your principal's time.

What you have to do is manage staff of the grade level or content area in this way: Group the staff by cognitive and relational strengths using this adaptation above of Carl Glickman's paradigm.²

Basically what Glickman says is in the teaching profession, there is an axis of cognition and commitment. He notes a teacher high in cognition (can think clearly through the priorities and issues) and commitment (genuinely cares) is a **professional**. An educator who has high cognition but low commitment is an **analytical**

observer. A teacher low in cognition but high in commitment is an **unfocused worker**. A teacher low in both cognition and commitment is a **dropout**.

The achievement liability with **analytical observers** is they often don't develop relationships with students, and there tends to be many parent complaints about them. The achievement liability with **unfocused workers** is they love the students but cannot identify priorities for time, thereby spending a great deal of time on activities that don't promote higher achievement. **Dropouts** must be addressed through the teacher evaluation, remediation and dismissal processes.

Every grade level or course team should have at least one professional

present. The professional helps and guides the team to better decisions. Each time the team meets, a very specific task is required of team members by the principal. That task is calibrating the assignments and homework to the standards.

Issue #3 is the level of instability in students' external resources.

Our current system of schooling assumes students' external resources are stable. We assign homework based on the concept there will be an adult to help children and that young people will have a place to do the homework at home. For many under-resourced students, life outside of school is unstable and unpredictable—and resources are scarce.

Resource	Questions to Determine Best Intervention
Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can the student afford the field trip or is a scholarship needed? • Can the student afford supplies for the project/science fair/other activity? • Is the student hungry? Must a linkage to food be found?
Emotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can the student verbalize choices? • Does the student have the language to mediate situations without resorting to fists?
Mental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can the student read at the appropriate grade level? • Can the student identify the final product or task? • Does the student know what will be evaluated and how?
Spiritual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do students believe they have some control over the situation or do they say there is nothing they can do? • Does the student have a future story and a plan to go with it?
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the student clean? • Are the student's clothes clean? • Can students physically take care of themselves?
Support systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the student the primary support system for the student's household? • Is there enough stability in the home that the student can have a place to keep and do work?
Relationships/ role models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the student have at least one adult who is nurturing and caring? • Does the student have three or more adults who care about the student's life? • Are all of the student's significant relationships with peers?
Knowledge of hidden rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the student use the "appropriate" school response to situations? • Does the student try to be invisible?
Formal register	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the student have access to formal register at home? • Does the student get right to the point when telling a story—or does the student begin at the end of the story and tell the story in no particular order?

Source: From R. K. Payne & B. H. Tucker, 2017, pages 21–22.

One of the quickest indicators of a lack of stability and support in the external environment is when homework is not returned. For true interventions to work, the staff and principal must be resource analysts of students for whom they are most concerned. From that resource analysis, the best interventions can be determined. Interventions don't work if the resource isn't available (see Questions to Determine Best Intervention, page 3).

Issue #4 is accountability.

Accountability is a numbers game. There is a great deal of confusion between accountability and achievement. Achievement is the student performance. Accountability is how the state ranks schools and decides if they meet the state criteria.

Accountability is based on two things: equity and excellence. With regard to equity, did minority, white, poor, second-language, and

special-education students perform very similarly with excellence? Are they continuing to increase and grow in their learning?

Equity is a civil rights issue. In fact, the reason the federal No Child Left Behind legislation was passed in 2001 was because education is a civil rights issue. The way to measure the effectiveness of education is in subgroups.

Excellence or growth, according to statisticians, can be measured accurately either by quartiles or quintiles. Virtually every state uses a four- or five-part growth model. For example, Texas uses Masters, Meets Expectations, Approaches Expectations, Does Not Meet. That correlates to quartiles. Florida uses A, B, C, D, F, which correlates to quintiles.

What states do is look at the amount of growth by subgroup; that way the state can assess both

equity and excellence. *And they look at it by **the number of students** who moved from one quartile or quintile to the next in each subgroup.*

Below is a simple grid you can use in your building to begin to somewhat predict your accountability rating. You have to count students.

Enter student names (see grid on right page). Do one chart for reading and another one for math. Use only one test. If you don't have data for a new student, make a guesstimate. This is a generic tool to predict how you will do on accountability.

Then by grade level or course level, the principal creates a chart that identifies the following: number of students by subgroup in a grade level. In addition, you need to have approximately 80% of your students by subgroup in the top two quartiles in order to do well on

TEST BAND	CAUCASIAN	AFRICAN AMERICAN	HISPANIC	LSES *	LEP **	SPECIAL EDUCATION
MASTERS 74–99%						
MEETS EXPECTATIONS 50–74%						
APPROACHES EXPECTATIONS 25–49%						
DOES NOT MEET 0–24%						

* Low socioeconomic status

** Limited English proficiency

TEST BAND	CAUCASIAN	AFRICAN AMERICAN	HISPANIC	LSES	LEP	SPECIAL EDUCATION
MASTERS 74–99%	John			John		John
MEETS EXPECTATIONS 50–74%						
APPROACHES EXPECTATIONS 25–49%		Sally		Sally		
DOES NOT MEET 0–24%						

accountability.

Write the names of all your students on sticky notes and put them on a large chart that you make of the grid. The whole conversation is to move students up to the next quartile or quintile so that you have growth. The key question is this: What does this student need in order to move to the next level of growth?

NOTE: In Texas there has been some reference to a three-tier system. That system does not address “does not meet.” But those students count on your accountability. It also should be noted Texas provides details about who counts and how. This chart is a generic and quick way for a principal to address growth issues.

Conclusion

To summarize, the following four steps constitute the basic issues of a Year 1 improvement model:

1. Time
2. Managing staff
3. Knowing students’ external resources
4. Measuring growth for accountability

Learn about these steps and more by watching a webinar I gave called “Six Basics of School Improvement, Particularly for High-Poverty Schools.” Visit ahaprocess.com/six-basics to view webinar.

The next article in this series will look at *Year 2* of school improvement, which is to calibrate student work, focus on student work, and accelerate growth by increasingly moving to expertise.

Endnotes

¹R. K. Payne & B. H. Tucker, 2017. *Research-Based Strategies: Narrowing the Achievement Gap for Under-Resourced Students*.

²Adapted from C. D. Glickman, 1981. Developmental supervision: Alternative practices for helping teachers improve instruction. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/full-text/ED208487.pdf>



Author

Dr. Ruby K. Payne is the founder of aha! Process and an author, speaker, publisher, and career educator. Recognized internationally for *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, her foundational book and workshop, Dr. Payne has helped students and adults of all economic backgrounds achieve academic, professional, and personal success.

Learn more from Dr. Payne:

Tune in to the **February 7 Lunch & Learn** webinar to learn more from Dr. Payne. She’ll present “School Improvement: Moving from Proficiency to Growth.” Explore six strategies to ensure higher academic growth and better student outcomes.

Dr. Payne will present a Featured Session during Summer Conference. Visit www.tepsa.org.