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- Can Innovation and Alignment Coexist?
- Disciplinary School Implements Project-Based Learning, Transforms Student Performance
- Solving Today's Literacy Challenges with Audio Technology
- Planting Seeds, Growing Minds

# Leaders of Learners

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## Thank You to Our Platinum Corporate Partners



# Can Innovation and Alignment Coexist?

By: Elizabeth A. Clark, Ed.D.

I have heard people say that teachers no longer have the opportunity to be creative or innovative because of high-stakes testing. If that is true, has teaching been reduced to a script that a technician can do, or does effective instruction still require the artful practice of the science of teaching and learning? This article examines what creative and innovative practice in teaching entails, and suggests that learning is strengthened when teachers are encouraged to be creative and innovative.

Under our current system teachers can easily adopt a belief that learning is all about how students perform on a high-stakes state assessment. This emphasis has become the driving force for planning lessons, selecting materials, designing student tasks, assessing students, and evaluating student performance. What gets sacrificed in the process are elements of instruction that make learning fun, meaningful, and transferable. We know that choice, novelty, student interests, real-life connections and engagement are critical elements to consider as teachers think about lesson design. In fact, teachers may need to be more creative and



innovative than ever before in order for all students to learn the required curricular standards at optimal levels. In other words, the requirements for students to achieve mastery of standards should not be a barrier to teacher creativity and innovation. Instead, educators should recognize that the notion that there is no room for creativity in teaching is a contradiction to our practice. Thus, our role as instructional leaders is to work to create the conditions whereby teacher creativity and innovation is developed, nurtured, and celebrated.

Other than our inordinate focus on high-stakes testing and accountability results, what other barriers are inherent in our educational system that stifles innovation? One obstacle may very well be our inability or failure to define creativity in a manner that fits into our current reality in education. Many would agree that this current reality includes teaching required curricular

standards, administering high stakes tests, selecting required resources, providing required programs for interventions, and addressing state-wide accountability requirements. Where then do we find the sweet spot between managing our current reality, maintaining system alignment in order to produce desired results, while providing autonomy for teachers to feel enabled and empowered to be creative and innovative?

Let's start by defining creativity within the context of curriculum alignment and state accountability. One

definition of creativity is the capability or act of conceiving something original or unusual. In terms of teaching, creativity involves designing lessons that incorporate ideas about how students learn, ways to engage learners, and how to utilize play within

the learning. When teachers are creative, they can see hidden patterns, make connections between things that aren't normally related, and develop original ideas for teaching a lesson or designing a student task. However, this creative thinking must exist within organizational constraints and the required learning goals, which is a difficult task that requires creative problem-solving. For example, if the problem the teacher is trying to solve is how to motivate students to learn content that is often perceived as boring, then the creative problem-solver will come up with imaginative ideas that make learning fun, exciting, interesting, motivating, memorable, and inspirational to students. Organizations may help facilitate

creativity and innovation by involving teachers in defining these concepts to better understand them as desired attributes of quality design work. As a result, teachers would have more clarity to focus their design work to include these attributes associated with creativity and innovation.

I also believe that being creative requires the willingness to be challenged beyond current competencies and embrace the risks of failure. Innovation emerges after multiple trials and errors. Teachers must be open to new possibilities,

remain curious about their daily work, and be capable of shaking off mistakes. Having a sense of humor is also important. When mistakes are made, the creative and innovative teacher knows how to have fun with their students and model

the idea that making a mistake is actually a learning opportunity. Such an attitude becomes a habit of mind, causing a shift in one's thinking and perspective. Organizations must create a culture where mistakes are allowed, learning is seen as a progression, and innovation results from challenging the status quo.

Another important consideration is that creative people have certain traits that are not always seen as strengths. Many innovative, free-spirited individuals are perceived as quirky or even as organizational mavericks. Often this results in these individuals going underground to avoid criticism and even ostracism by their peers and/





or supervisors. Instead, why not create conditions for these traits to be seen as strengths, rather than liabilities? Creative individuals are generally seen as more analytical, always asking questions, pushing the envelope, coming up with creative solutions to a problem that likely challenges the status quo. These teachers could be perceived as not being a team player, exhibiting playfulness, or even being outlandish. Creative individuals often have heightened emotional sensitivity, are seen as nonconforming and are not afraid to be seen as different or exhibiting unusual thoughts. While these character traits are not always evident in adults, more often than not, we see these traits more clearly in small children as they play or learn. What happens as children grow older is analogous to putting a blanket on a fire; the flame of creativity is smothered until it is just barely smoldering, or has been completely extinguished. The current reality in schools and teacher attitudes toward teaching and learning serve to smother and extinguish the creative and playful nature of young children. This problem may be resolved when organizations experience a culture shift that welcomes new ideas, celebrates creative problem-solving, embraces the generation of novel ideas and adopts processes that utilize creativity to solve problems of practice.

George Bernard Shaw said, "Some men see things as they are and say 'why?' I dream of things that never were and say 'why not?'" We are at a point where teachers must be willing to step out of their comfort zone. Educators today cannot be constrained by the way we learned in the past. Instead, we need to see new possibilities. Ask our students how they learn best. Listen to what they tell us. A perfect example comes to mind. There is a teacher who spends his summers designing all

of his science content to be delivered in a digital gaming format. He allows students to design their own icons so that he can personalize feedback based on their work. He has made a game out of learning high school science that aligns to what his students love to do. It is amazing to see how his creativity and innovation has made learning science fun and engaging for a group of high school students in a drop-out recovery program.

What are the skills that need to be developed and nurtured in our teachers in order for them to be more creative? According to a recent blog by Dylan Goldby, there are ten skills that help build and support creativity:

1. Patience
2. Goal setting
3. Personal drive
4. Discipline
5. Grit
6. Curiosity
7. Having an open mind
8. Playfulness
9. Questioning everything
10. Technical knowledge.

Goldby stresses how important creativity is in today's world. Industry and businesses are constantly on the lookout for people who are creative thinkers. This point drives home the need for schools to also develop creativity, but it must start with our teachers feeling empowered to be creative. Again, the conundrum for educators is how to walk the fine line between curricular alignment within our high-stakes accountability system while promoting creativity in designing engaging and effective student tasks.

The questions that school districts need to answer are many, starting with how do we foster teacher creativity without sacrificing curricular alignment? What are the teacher skills that need to be developed, nurtured, and celebrated? Probably the most critical skill is one that Goldby mentioned, patience. Time and space are needed for teachers to think, collaborate, and do design work. Allowing teachers, the opportunity to share their thinking builds a network of risk-takers. Encouraging teachers to be problem-solvers around their practice and in the design of challenging student task is also important. This approach facilitates development of the requisite technical knowledge among teachers as well as provides resource in the form of think partners. In addition, the district needs to establish goals for creative design work and develop systems to share that work across the district so that others are inspired to embark on this journey of innovation and creativity.

Every teacher is an architect of learning. When teachers are seen and supported as creative architects rather than just consumers and users of commercial materials, then new and effective approaches to instruction may be conceived and ultimately designed to meet the unique needs of their students. How teachers view this role and how they design the learning task and structure the learning environment will begin to fit the definition of creativity and innovation. Something new and unique will evolve. The new role for teacher, therefore, is about designing interesting and engaging work that students are motivated to complete. This role is also about coaching students to be learners, to be curious, to be disciplined, to have grit, and to be goal oriented. When students truly become excited about their learning and become something more than compliant learners, hasn't the teacher started the process of creating something that has never been made or imagined for that student? What the student has learned is something that is personally unique to them. And we have moved closer to achieving the definition of creative and innovative teaching.

## References

Goldby, Dylan (2018, October 4). 10 Creative skills you need to keep creating. <https://www.creativelive.com/blog/10-creative-skills-you-need-to-keep-creating/>

## About the Author



*Elizabeth A. Clark, Ed.D., joined Birdville ISD as Associate Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction & Accountability in May 2012. She is responsible for providing direction, evaluation and leadership for the overall curriculum and instruction program of the district. Dr. Clark brings more than 40 years of educational experience to Birdville ISD. Formerly, she was chief academic officer with the Katy Independent School District. In addition, Clark has been a teacher, instructional specialist for social studies, dean of students, junior high principal, assistant superintendent, deputy superintendent, chief academic officer, and college adjunct professor and lecturer. She received her bachelor's degree from the University of Southern Arkansas and her master's and doctorate degrees from the University of Arkansas.*

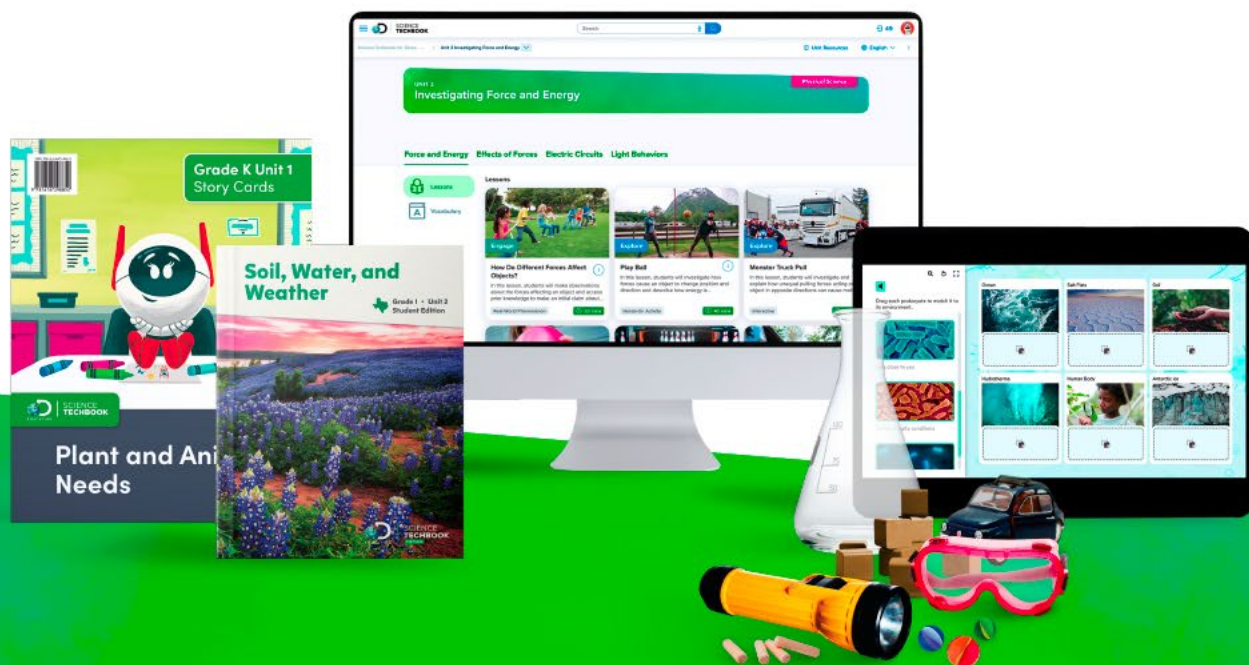


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# Disciplinary School Implements Project-Based Learning, Transforms Student Performance

By Dr. Paul Hand

Fernando Gutierrez took on a massive challenge when he became principal of the [Instruction & Guidance Center](#) in McAllen, Texas. This was where the kids who had significant struggles with their education went – students from 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades with habitual challenges including drugs, physical fighting and truancy. They had low motivation to learn, limited communication skills and almost none could read on grade level.

Searching for ways to increase student engagement and performance at his school, Gutierrez and a handful of his staff found themselves attending the Tapia Camps at Rice University's Tapia Center, which is dedicated to empowering minorities and women to be future leaders in academia and industry. The camps involve a professional development program that strengthens classrooms by equipping educators with the skills to implement Project-Based Learning (PBL). More than 375 teachers and school district administrators have attended the camps and implemented PBL in their classrooms all across Texas. Gutierrez had heard of PBL and its success with student engagement but didn't know where to begin utilizing it at his school.



PBL is a pedagogy that empowers students to work on authentic real-world challenges and includes the accountability of a public presentation or product, all while helping students make progress toward meeting state standards and learning goals. Students develop skills in critical thinking, teamwork, communication, and perseverance –important elements for success in almost any career. This method is proven to increase student engagement, often providing students with a sense of purpose and motivation to learn. In fact, [the method has significant benefits regarding equity for STEM education, as it has been shown to cause similar learning rates in boys and girls and in members of different racial and ethnic groups.](#)

It didn't take long for Gutierrez and his fellow educators from McAllen ISD to experience the benefits of PBL first-hand, as the Tapia Camps very intentionally immerse participants in the role of the student through its programming. As soon as they arrived on campus, they joined





other K-12 administrators and teachers of all subjects while getting settled into their dorm rooms and readying to kick off the program. In addition to earning Continuing Professional Education hours, the five-night, six-day experience provided participants exceptional networking opportunities with other educators from across the state and beyond.

The Instruction & Guidance Center staff had many positive experiences of learning how to employ PBL at the Tapia Camps. There were also some humbling moments. One teacher recalled crying out of frustration because she was struggling to understand how to complete a specific activity. It was an eye-opening moment for Gutierrez and his fellow educators, as they realized teachers can forget what it feels like to be the student, and particularly students who may be struggling to understand a lesson.

This is exactly why effective professional development programs like the Tapia Camps are so important for educators to experience on a regular basis – to remind themselves what they are asking their students to tackle every day in the classroom.

Insights from the camps proved so impactful that Gutierrez and his team hosted their own abridged PBL workshop to share their new knowledge and skills with the rest of their staff once they returned to McAllen. The semester that followed was full of hands-on, engaging projects.

“Once a semester, our teachers guide students through a major project from start to finish using PBL. We invite parents and the community to come see the students’ final products. Our students have built green houses and dog houses. We even planted a school garden. We look for experiences where students can take what they learn in the classroom and apply it in the real world in a more authentic way,” Gutierrez explained.

For the garden, students worked in teams to research and plan the layout, select plants, and identify maintenance requirements. They also learned about the importance of sustainability and how to make the garden environmentally friendly.

The school quickly noticed an increase in students’ emotional intelligence as a result of requiring them to work more in pairs or groups. And students’ confidence experienced a massive boost, as they were allowed to make discoveries on their own instead of having a

specific method dictated to them. Additionally, students could incorporate their culture and exercise their creativity when they had to present what they learned from a project or lesson. One student chose to present a Dia De Los Muertos family tree through a song she had written. Others chose to explain their project solutions through art or skits.

Another unexpected benefit the school experienced as a result of implementing PBL was a change in the community's view of these students. Before, they were viewed as inherently unmotivated and unengaged. Now, thanks to PBL, these kids have a different attitude towards learning and are beginning to discover a new potential for themselves. The community has gotten to witness this transformation, as students have proudly gone door to door inviting neighbors to attend events they planned at the school as part of their curriculum.

"Our students still have struggles in their personal lives. But now, unlike before we used PBL, they are asking us all the time, 'When are we going to go outside and work on a project?' They understand that the knowledge they're gaining now can be taken far beyond the classroom. We've created a dramatic increase in student engagement since implementing PBL, and we can be very proud of that!" Gutierrez said.

The success at Gutierrez's school is a testament to the power of PBL, and to the impact of empowering underrepresented groups. Much like the Instruction & Guidance Center that Gutierrez runs, the Tapia Center's end goal is to give students and educators who may be disadvantaged in resources a boost towards success, regardless of their background. Even the Tapia Center and the camps themselves are inspired and named after a Latino mathematician, Rice University professor and recipient of the National Medal of Science, Dr. Richard Tapia, who created a renowned career from humble beginnings in an under resourced environment.

McAllen, a majority-minority geographic area with [85% Hispanic population](#) and a school district that has [35% of students enrolled in bilingual learning programs](#), understands the importance of the conversation about educational resources and equity.

"I have been an educator for 20 years, and I don't think I have ever gone through another training where we actively enhance our skills as educators like this," said principal Gutierrez on



the Tapia Camp educator training. “The hands-on approach from beginning to end really puts the Tapia Camps on a different level as far as professional development goes. It really would benefit every teacher to attend and learn how PBL is implemented successfully and go back to their campus and apply it.”

There are more than 1,250 school districts in Texas, and every single one of them has a responsibility to equip the young Texans roaming their hallways with tools they can use for the rest of their lives. No one will remember problem No. 34 from Tuesday’s homework. But they’ll remember when they work on authentic projects that they can proudly show to their community, using teamwork, sustained inquiry, and self-reflection.

If your district doesn’t use PBL, maybe it’s time to ask your leadership if it’s time to give it a try. This powerful tool has the potential to significantly improve academic success and change the trajectories of students across the state, no matter their race, gender, or financial background. It’s a crucial, accessible solution – one that Texas teachers and students deserve.

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## About the Author



*Dr. Paul Hand is the Director of Tapia Camps at the Tapia Center for Excellence and Equity in Education at Rice University in Houston, TX. He is also an Associate Professor of Mathematics and Computer Science at Northeastern University in Boston, MA. He received his Ph.D. in Mathematics in 2009 from New York University. His research interests focus on the mathematics of artificial intelligence and machine learning, and he directs outreach programs for K-12 students, K-12 educators, community college educators, and more.*





# Assessment for Learning: A Proven Strategy for Closing the Achievement Gap

This comprehensive two-day academy has been specifically crafted for district and campus leadership teams who want to understand the importance of implementing a balanced assessment system. The academy is focused on addressing the achievement gap and creating a learning culture that caters to the needs of all students. Throughout the program, participants will benefit from the expertise of two seasoned campus and district leaders who will guide them in developing an effective assessment system. They will explore innovative approaches that instill the view that assessment for learning is an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Additionally, the academy will cover strategies for addressing the challenges posed by the COVID slide, including designing an assessment system that meets the specific needs of learners who have experienced learning loss. The program is designed to equip participants with practical skills and knowledge that will enable them to transform their students into lifelong learners.

## PRESENTERS:



**Dr. Elizabeth A. Clark**

Associate Superintendent for  
Curriculum, Instruction &  
Accountability, Birdville ISD



**Jaimie Smith**

Former Director of  
Teaching and Learning,  
Texas ASCD presenter



**June 21 & 22, 2023**



**8:00 AM - 4:00 PM**



**Little Elm ISD  
(DFW Area)**





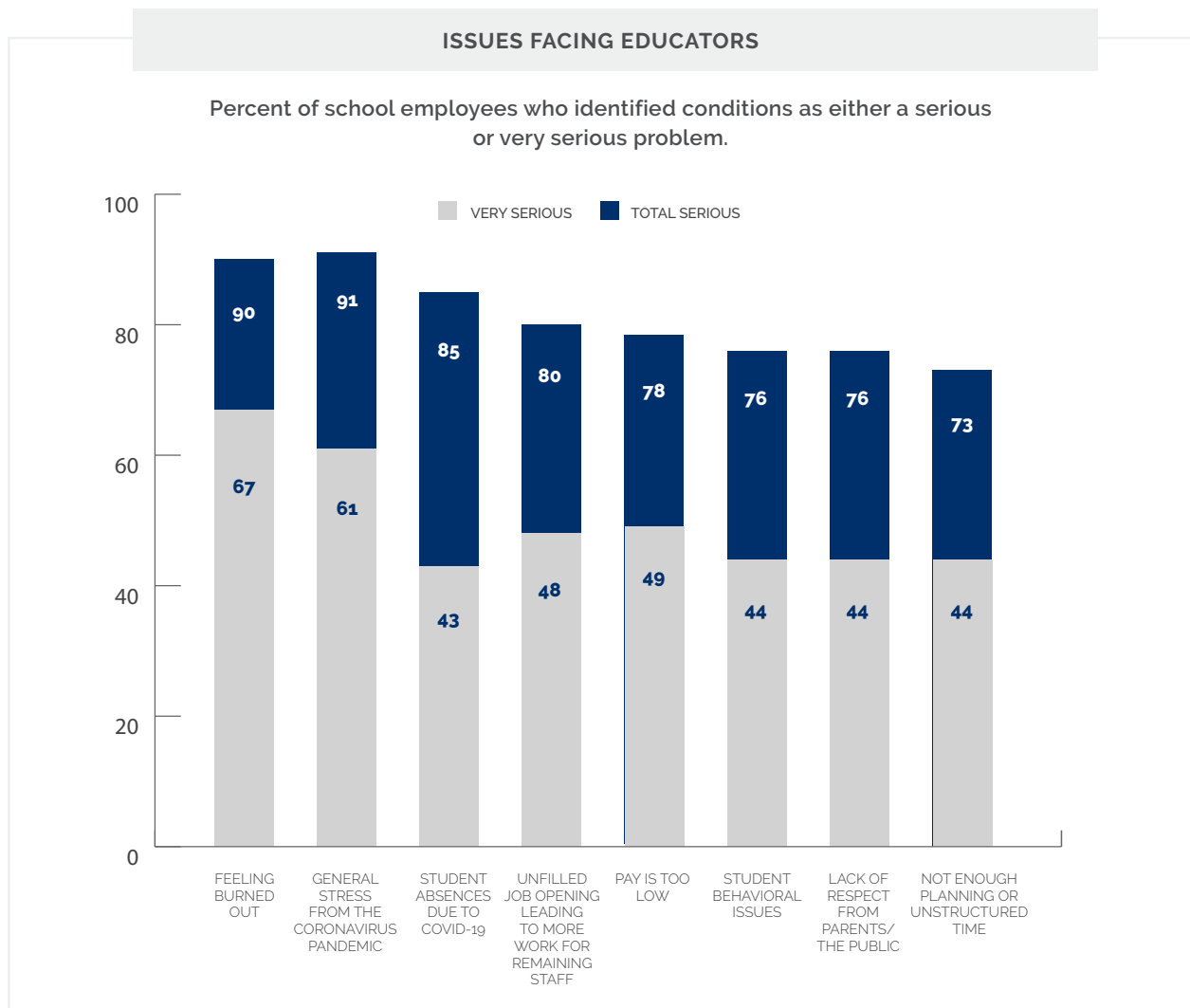
## Solving Today's Literacy Challenges with Audio Technology

In one of the most demanding school environments in memory, educators need more support. Providing them with expanded tools and technologies helps ensure students are reading at proficient levels, which is key to academic success.

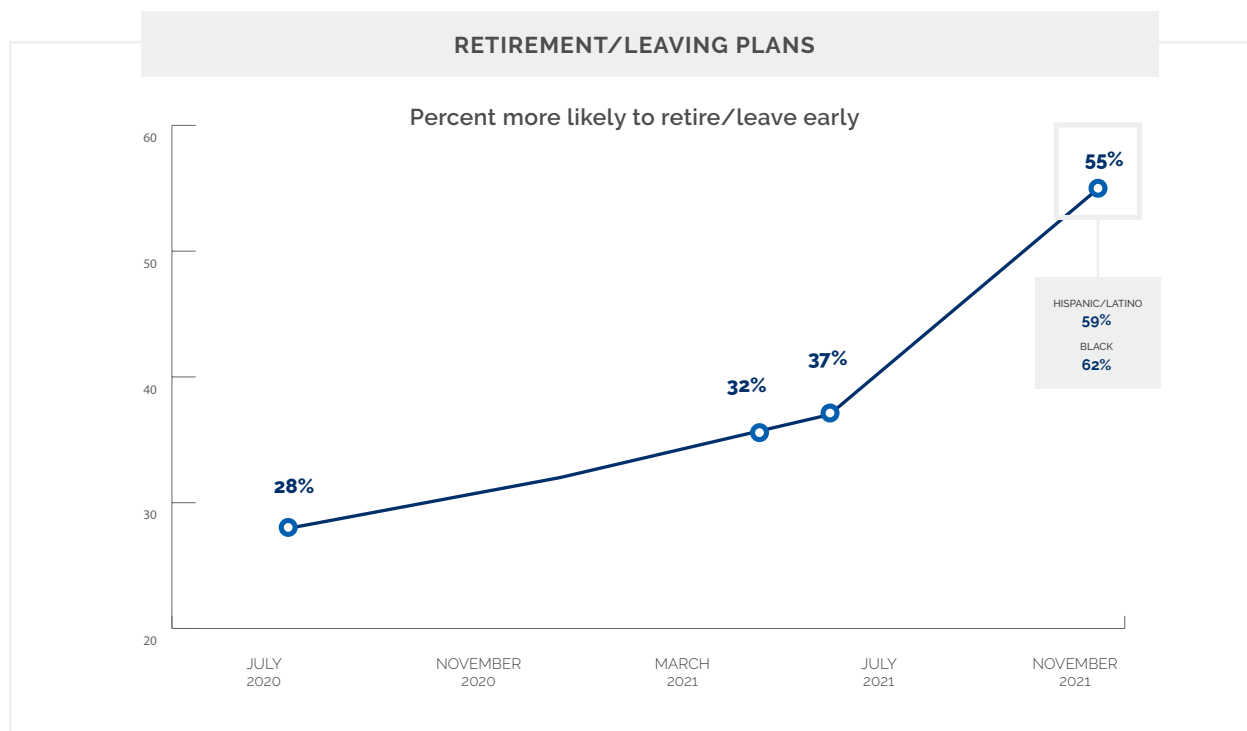
## Introduction

Educators today are facing unprecedented challenges at every turn: Slashed budgets. Student absences. Teacher burnout. A pandemic.

In the middle of the most demanding school environment in recent memory, nearly every community is experiencing critical staffing shortages, affecting teachers' and students' performances and mental health. Nearly three-quarters of educators have taken on more responsibilities due to staff shortages, according to the National Educators Associations' most recent survey<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile, 90% reported feeling serious burnout.



This has led to 55% of members reporting that they aim to leave education earlier than originally planned — up from 37% at the start of the 2021 school year, with even higher rates among BIPOC educators who are already underrepresented in the education system<sup>2</sup>.



Beyond staff shortages, many schools are also facing new budget trouble. Public K-12 school funding already declined dramatically in many states after the Great Recession, with nearly 60% of states providing less total school funding per student pre-pandemic than in 2008, before most students were even born<sup>3</sup>. Today, state budgets have been recalculated due to lower tax revenue and increased spending on unemployment and other services amid COVID; because states contribute about half of all public-school funding nationwide, cuts have come for school funding.

Staffing shortages and budget cuts have far-reaching consequences across communities. The academic performance of students in low-income districts fell even further behind over the past two years. Studies have shown that students learned much less during remote lessons during the pandemic, with direct impacts on literacy and reading levels<sup>4</sup>. Research from the University of Virginia found that approximately 35% of K-2 students in the state scored below their expected levels in fall 2021 — an “alarming” 20-year low, according to the researchers<sup>5</sup>.

These intersecting crises in today’s schools have exposed and amplified inequalities across society, from poverty to race to disability to geographical isolation. Lower-income students, students of color, and students with learning disabilities are more at risk of reading and writing deficiencies, are less likely to graduate high school, and have less earning potential as adults. In addition, in schools, less proficient readers are prone to emotional distress and frustration, leading to disruptive behavior in classrooms.

Schools are often already ill-equipped to deal with struggling students. But research shows that teachers who work in more supportive school environments are able to more effectively raise student performance on assessments, as compared to those who do not<sup>6</sup>. Today’s educators need far greater access to resources and support in order to ensure successful academic outcomes. Expanding teacher capacity is critical to prevent the worst potential impacts of these massive disruptions across society.

**Research shows that teachers who work in more supportive school environments are able to more effectively raise student performance on assessments**

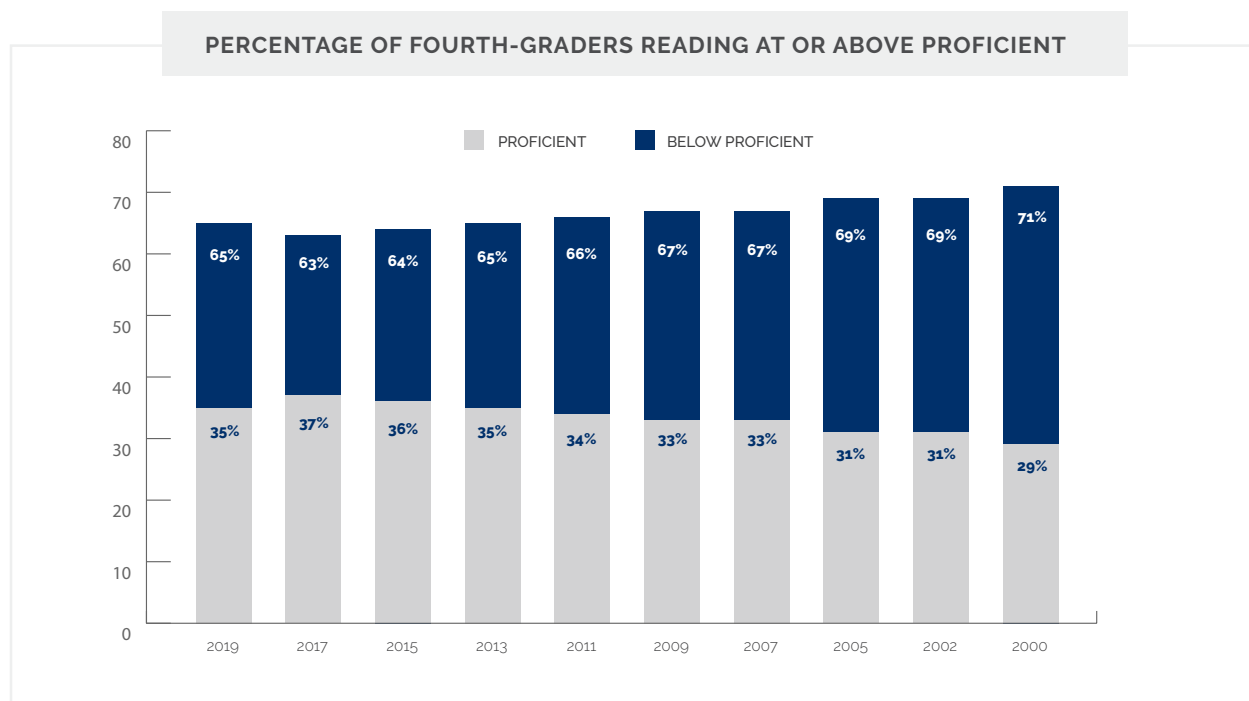
## Supporting Struggling Readers is Key to Improving Conditions for All

Literacy is the foundation of overall educational success. Reading skills are the gateway to success in every classroom subject — the need to read is not limited to their English Language Arts classes; literacy skills are essential in math, history, and all other content areas. Beyond the classroom, literacy is an essential daily life skill needed for reading everything from road signs to store labels to nametags. Not being able to read has a profound effect on our self-esteem, social-emotional skills, and imagination.

Yet in 2019, the most recent national reading assessment, 65% of American fourth-grade students read at a level considered below proficient<sup>7</sup>.

Literacy skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, can be some of the most difficult to support because students can fall on such a wide spectrum. Students enter school at varying levels of preparedness for reading, and usually spend the first few years of school "learning to read." If reading skills aren't developed by around grade 4 when education begins to focus on more complex and higher-order thinking skills, studies have shown that students rarely catch up with their peers to become fluent readers.

**The need to read is not limited to their English Language Arts classes; literacy skills are essential in math, history, and all other content areas**





Common struggles for students when learning to read include reading comprehension, or the ability to mentally process written words and understand what they mean in order to integrate these new concepts with past knowledge. Some of these challenges begin with problems with “decoding,” or the ability to sound out written words and recognize familiar word parts. Other students have difficulties mechanically processing words, if the ability to visualize and conceptualize language and information is not natural. Still more students have issues with vocabulary, or knowledge of words, as well as overall structure (morphology), use (grammar), meanings (semantics), and links to other words (word/semantic relationships).

These problems do not arise in a vacuum: factors that can also affect students' literacy levels and vocabularies include learning disabilities, limited English language skills, lack of access to reading material, and lack of resources or support in schools and at home. Poverty and low reading proficiency can also be a perpetuating cycle. Childhood poverty tends to be intergenerational, as 73% of children whose parents do not have high school diplomas are in low-income families<sup>8</sup>. Research shows that a lack of early childhood support directly impacts students' success rates later on. The number of words a child hears before entering school, for example, and whether or not a child is exposed to reading at home, significantly affect a child's reading preparedness. Since 60% of low-income families in America can't afford books, many children start early at a disadvantage<sup>9</sup>.

When children struggle with reading, due to different individual factors leading to unique specific challenges, they need varied support systems. None of these challenges are insurmountable — the better each student's literacy challenges are recognized and addressed, the easier their path to success will become.

The struggles of individual students can lead to lower overall school system performance on assessments, resulting in student, parent, and teacher stress, and ironically, even deeper budget cuts. Many schools that do not perform well on national assessments are already under-resourced, in low-income and/or rural communities. These schools need efficient, research-proven support to supplement struggling students' learning.

## Solving Today's Literacy Challenges with Audio Technology

The data suggest that schools and districts wishing to improve reading performance need solutions that enable educators to deliver evidence-based reading support to their students who struggle to read. As children age and learning shifts from “learning to read” to “reading to learn,” support can mean the difference between learning from reading or suffering sustained academic failure. To empower students to not only be able to read but also to want to read, a holistic approach — offering intensive care for the most at-risk students and specialized attention for those with moderate literacy needs — is key.

At Learning Ally, we embody this approach by using a “Whole Child Literacy” method to provide educators with effective, science-backed solutions that support struggling readers in any classroom. Whole Child Literacy builds on “whole child” pedagogy and encompasses a variety of factors that impact a child's ability to learn to read proficiently, including:

- Brain-based reading instruction;
- A child's cognitive factors; and
- The environments, in school and out, in which a child develops.

The [Learning Ally Audiobook Solution](#), composed of high-quality, human-read audiobooks and a suite of teacher resources to monitor and support student progress, is designed to turn struggling readers into engaged learners.

With a library of more than 80,000 culturally relevant, curriculum-aligned audiobooks, our Audiobook Solution has all the books students need to read as well as the ones they will want to read for fun. The Audiobook Solution levels the playing field by allowing struggling readers to access grade-level content aligned to their cognitive level rather than their reading ability so they can develop essential vocabulary and background knowledge, and accelerate their learning.

All of Learning Ally's audiobooks are human-read, most by trained voice artists, so students can hear the prosody of the writing as intended by the author and experience a true model of fluency. They feature culturally appropriate artists whenever possible while content area experts record textbooks. Human-read audiobooks make all the difference, supporting students with auditory processing issues who might otherwise have difficulty deciphering synthetic, computer-generated words.

With a library of titles that includes popular fiction and series, classic literature, textbooks, and more, students of any age are sure to find something that interests them. They can even download books directly to their device to read offline, providing anytime, anywhere access — so students who might lack WiFi connectivity at home can still continue their learning.

The Audiobook Solution also includes tools to track how many pages a student has read as well as the amount of time spent reading, so teachers can track student progress and hold them accountable for time on task.

The benefits of differentiation are well-documented, but many educators are stretched too thin to create new lesson plans for every student. The Learning Ally Audiobook Solution allows students to set their own reading pace and control the size, spacing, and brightness of the font, customizing the experience to their learning needs and supporting teachers' in-classroom capacities. Built-in progress monitoring and the ability for educators to communicate directly with their students make providing differentiated instruction a breeze.

In many classrooms, there is only enough time to do close reading activities with short books or excerpts of long books. The Learning Ally Audiobook Solution's library of audiobook titles includes all books aligned with Bookworms, Wit and Wisdom, and other popular curriculums; they can be used in classrooms, and then, struggling readers can finish books independently, saving valuable class time for discourse and critical thinking exercises.

**The Learning Ally Audiobook Solution's library of audiobook titles includes all books aligned with Bookworms, Wit and Wisdom, and other popular curriculums**



While audiobooks can't replace practicing reading with decodable text, the Learning Ally Audiobook Solution's read-along highlighted text feature helps model fluent reading. It also allows struggling readers to consume the same books as their peers, so they can confidently participate in class discussions. To ensure students understand what they read, the Audiobook Solution includes student-centric features like embedded dictionaries and annotation capabilities. This allows students to easily look up new words and practice summarizing what they have read without leaving the audiobook app. Teachers can even review their work from a simple dashboard and follow-up if they see any cause for concern.

## Proven Research

A great deal of academic research into the efficacy of audiobook support for literacy skills exists. Audiobooks have long been considered an alternative for access to literacy especially important for readers with physical and cognitive difficulties, but they can support every reader in their reading journeys.

For example, one study found that read-aloud or audiobooks can introduce new vocabulary and concepts, provide a fluent model for students to emulate, and allows students access to literature that they are unable to read independently<sup>10</sup>.

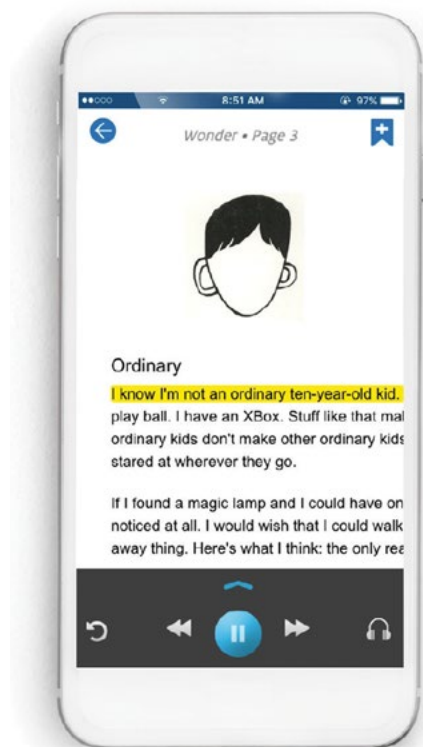
Furthermore, numerous studies point to the benefit of audiobooks as a remedy for student disengagement with reading<sup>11 12 13 14</sup>.

In addition, listening to books can benefit readers in different age groups in various ways. For younger children, researchers found that a "word gap" exists between children from low-income homes and high-income homes, and hearing new vocabulary in books out loud exposes children to a higher quantity of spoken sophisticated vocabulary<sup>15 16</sup>.

As for older students, researchers found that the relationship between listening and reading comprehension strengthens after second grade, around when students begin to master their decoding skills<sup>17</sup>. Studies on middle and high school readers found that the influence of listening comprehension on variance in reading comprehension continues to grow over time<sup>18</sup>. More research found that audiobooks can be used with adolescent readers to improve their reading fluency, expand their vocabulary, develop their comprehension, and increase their motivation to interact with books<sup>19</sup>.

Commissioned efficacy studies of the Learning Ally Audiobook Solution's impact on struggling readers when implemented with fidelity, include:

- Increased vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension;
- Greater self-confidence, motivation, and classroom engagement; and
- Higher assessment and high-stakes test scores.



**Audiobooks have long been considered an alternative for access to literacy**

## Double the Rate of Reading Growth

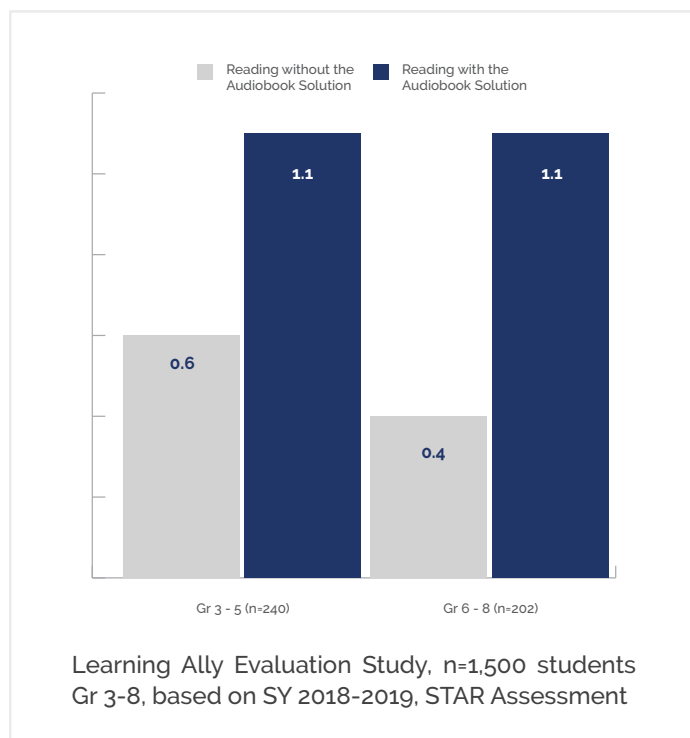
In 2017, a large Denver school system turned to Learning Ally to support their students who were at risk of falling behind because they struggled to read grade-level text. Looking for ways to tackle inclusivity and accessibility in their schools, administrators chose the Learning Ally Audiobook Solution to offer students supplemental help reading. Students used the Learning Ally Audiobooks App to download books and read, thereby developing essential comprehension and background knowledge necessary to make progress in their education. Educators used the Learning Ally Educator Portal to help students select books and monitor their progress during school and throughout the summer.

Students in grades 3-8 were evaluated over a series of three benchmark assessments during the 2018-2019 school year. Learning Ally compared students' performance on the STAR Assessment and the extent to which they demonstrated fidelity of implementation — or reading with frequency (at least 20 minutes a day for 33 days) — showing correlations to reading level performance. Approximately 800 students attending 34 schools were included in the sample.

The results were very significant: Prior to using the Learning Ally Audiobook Solution, educators in the Denver school system could expect to improve reading levels among typical students who struggle to learn due to neurological differences in reading at a rate of about 0.4-grade levels of improvement.

**Students who engaged with the Audiobook Solution ... typically achieved about double the rate of reading growth**

When examining students who engaged with the Audiobook Solution at rates indicative of reading with frequency, they typically achieved about double the rate of reading growth (0.9).



In addition to students making about double the rate of reading growth, the probability of students achieving a full grade level of reading growth was almost twice as likely to occur when students were engaged in reading with the Audiobook Solution at rates approaching reading with frequency.

In particular, the Learning Ally Audiobook Solution supported specific literacy skills at age-appropriate levels. For younger students, the Audiobook Solution builds fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. For older students, the Audiobook Solution allows them to keep pace with class and work to their capability.

Educators, students, and families throughout the study experienced the benefits of student reading achievement, including academic success, heightened motivation, reduced frustration, and a culture that fosters a joy and celebration of reading.



## Conclusion

Working in education has always been a labor of love — and one of the most difficult and undervalued professions in America. Our current education system is facing intersecting crises on nearly every dimension, with potential impacts for generations to come. Educators need far more support inside and outside of the classroom in order to protect academic achievement for students, especially those already vulnerable. When students fail to learn to read or keep up reading, it perpetuates inequality far beyond the classroom.

The Audiobook Solution can help both teachers and students overcome these crises. Audiobooks can be another tool in the toolbox to expand teacher capacity, enable classroom cohesion, provide scaffolding for learning, and empower student success. The Learning Ally Audiobook Solution includes a host of student-centric programs to ensure engagement and successful ongoing implementation, as well as a suite of reporting and progress monitoring tools for teachers to help manage assignments, track student reading, and provide updates to parents and administrators. The Learning Ally Audiobook Solution is not just an audiobook — it's a research-backed resource for today's classrooms.

**The Learning Ally Audiobook Solution is not just an audiobook — it's a research-backed resource for today's classrooms.**



Learning Ally is a leading nonprofit education solutions organization dedicated to equipping educators with proven solutions that help new and struggling learners reach their potential. Our range of literacy-focused offerings for students pre-k to 12th grade and catalog of professional learning allow us to support more than 200,000 educators across the us.

**For more information, call 800-221-1098 or visit [LearningAlly.org](https://www.LearningAlly.org).**

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# Planting Seeds - Growing Minds: Sustainable Gardens for Schools

By Marc Wigler

## Introduction

Sustainable Gardens for Schools offers a unique turn-key, holistic program for students that teaches hydroponic gardening, and promotes sustainability and healthy lifestyles – both physical and emotional. <https://www.sustainablegardens.com>. Our school program was designed to support teachers; and we believe that we can make a lasting positive impact on students, school systems, families, and communities across Texas.

We connect students who have faced isolation for far too long and connect them to other schools and students in their city or elsewhere around the state. Together students will learn and work with one another to help address the urgent problem of hunger in their community or in their surrounding area(s). Schools will compete and unite as they embark on creating sustainable gardens within their school(s). As we expand to add additional sites across Texas, we will also connect those areas and their school systems and students. We will host friendly city to city competitions and learn about different cultures and their foods and recipes from around the state, country, and from other countries and cultures as well because we offer a sustainable garden system throughout the world.



## How It Works

Sustainable Gardens for Schools is educational and fun, as we bring the farm of the future into the classroom (Farm to Classroom). We designed the program to scale, and to assure consistency and continuity, while making every aspect easy for teachers. Our eight (8) week foundational course covers: hydroponic farming systems; environmental science; Social and Emotional Learning (SEL); and connections between diet, health, and wellness. The continued



experience for students includes: cycles of planting; nutrient application; plant harvesting and replacement; maintenance of plants and equipment; and troubleshooting.

Teacher support includes weekly student facing video lessons in which we take over the classroom, accompanied by teacher facing videos that give an overview of each lesson, as well as the guides that include interactive digital and printable worksheets.

Teachers also benefit from our How-To series, including:

- Creating a job sign-up and rotation program for the students;
- Storing, managing, maintaining, and administering supplies, materials and tools;
- Project Based Learning examples with specifics;
- Growing, harvesting and troubleshooting;
- Simple menus and tastings from the garden.

Our website also supports teachers, including:

- Email notifications of reminders for garden tasks, maintenance items, planting and harvest milestones;
- Plant journal that can be easily uploaded with weekly student planting and growing data, photos, videos that can be shared with staff and parents;
- Plant journal tracking with updates on harvest totals, their growth rates, and other metrics, as well as tracking harvested produce provided to the cafeteria and/or donated to local food banks;
- Regular Zoom teacher support sessions that can be attended live or recorded that can be accessed and viewed at any time;
- Online community forum and blogs;
- Robust resources including links, additional Project Based Learning ideas, videos that showcase Sustainable Agriculture from around the world, including interesting new commercial initiatives.

We use a modular system for the curriculum so that the many aspects of Sustainable Agriculture (Ag) including seeds, growing, harvesting, maintaining, and troubleshooting are a consistent part of the core teaching package. We then provide pick and play curriculum modules suited for the various lower and middle school students, as well as continuing education materials as the students progress from learning to farming.

The course curriculum focuses on grades K-8, broken into grade level clusters. For the upper school students, we will be implementing our Apprentice program, which our



experienced non-profit team member, <https://www.saltservice.org>, will administer. They are an Illinois based organization out of Highland Park, run by both Illinois teachers and administrators.

At a minimum, the Apprentices will be completing the Sustainable Ag modules. The volunteers can earn Community Service hours with a choice of two different options:

- Assist the Lower & Middle School teachers and students with the administration, management, data collection, student uploads and troubleshooting for the course and student gardens;
- Coordinate and administer the city-wide food bank and donation program, including securing locations, marketing, tracking quantities, scheduling volunteers, organizing periodic family and community events, and other administrative tasks.

We will be supporting an upper school led food bank program for the students to play a strong leadership role in feeding the hungry throughout their community, using produce that their fellow students will grow. This is especially timely and urgent, as the sudden end of the emergency additional benefits granted during the pandemic for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has been characterized as a “hunger cliff” for the millions that are affected. This is a great way to raise awareness, and let students take pride in leading an effort to help their fellow citizens, while learning about food security.

We will provide participating students with teacher and administrator recommendations for their college applications that highlight their activities, as well as specific achievements from the Sustainable Garden Feed the Hungry program. This will provide our participant Apprentices with a unique and positive community service story to tell with their college admissions applications.

## Conclusion

We endeavored to connect the dots to bring many great ideas and existing initiatives together when we designed our Sustainable School program. This led us to start

with a Sustainable Ag based garden program, and then include the various positive healthy diet, lifestyle, therapeutic benefits and tools, and core sustainability messages.

Our approach will help level the playing field between those communities and schools in need, and those that are fortunate to have extensive resources available. We feature Sustainable Ag using soilless systems (just air and water) and focus on the challenge of feeding a growing world population with diminishing potable water and tillable land. We highlight the connection of plant-based diets to health and wellness, as well as Mindfulness tools and techniques, this benefits students in every aspect throughout Texas and around the country.

We also want to help shape an optimistic and sustainable future by providing personal healthy lifestyle tools, introducing environmentally friendly food related vocational options, including examples of associated creative solutions, and providing simple but effective therapeutic techniques that can be both effective and fun!

The students of today will help to define our future. It is important for us to nourish their bodies and minds with as much healthy information as we can, and to help them shape a sustainable and healthy world for all.

## About the Author



*Marc Wigler began teaching kindergarten in Chicago in 1994. His published thesis is entitled “A Qualitative Study on Kindergarten Teachings Utilizing the Child Development Associations Goal on Maintaining a Safe, Healthy Learning Environment.” In 2000, Mr. Wigler was hired by Success for All to become a national trainer, where he taught teachers, administrators, and district level personnel on how to teach reading. He then went back to the classroom to create a model classroom for the State of Illinois for other schools to model his work successfully. Mr. Wigler has presented both locally and nationally on the importance of labor-management collaborative efforts to bring about school reform and was recognized by the U.S. Department of Education three times for helping to turn around a school district in need of repair.*

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## July 12-14

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(Session 2 of 2)

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## Membership Application

### Contact Information

(Please print clearly)

☐ Mr. ☐ Ms. ☐ Dr. \_\_\_\_\_  
(Name)

Position: \_\_\_\_\_ Affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

Preferred Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Fax: \_\_\_\_\_

Preferred E-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_  
(\*Required to receive online benefits.)

### Demographics

#### Gender

☐ Female ☐ Male

#### How many years have you been in the field of education?

☐ 0-4 ☐ 5-9 ☐ 10-14 ☐ 15-19 ☐ 20-24 ☐ 25-29 ☐ 30 or more years

#### Age

☐ 20-29 ☐ 30-39 ☐ 40-49 ☐ 50-59 ☐ 60-69 ☐ 70-79 ☐ 80+

#### Ethnicity

☐ African American ☐ Asian ☐ Caucasian ☐ Hispanic  
☐ Native American ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

#### Grade Level

☐ Elementary ☐ Middle School ☐ High School ☐ College

#### District Type

☐ Urban ☐ Rural ☐ Suburban

What year did you become a member of Texas ASCD?  
\_\_\_\_\_

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Enter  
Amount

<input type="checkbox"/> Campus Membership <i>One principal and ten faculty members.</i>	\$ 695.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Administrative/University	\$189.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Full-time Teacher (Pre-K12)	\$ 80.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Full-time Student <i>Applicant must be (1) enrolled in an accredited university, college, community college; and be considered a full-time student according to the criteria of the attending school.</i>	\$ 30.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Retired <i>Retired "Administrative/University" or "Full-time Teacher".</i>	\$ 25.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Two-Year Membership	\$285.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Lifetime Member	\$1150.00	\$ _____

### Regional Affiliate Dues

<input type="checkbox"/> Alamo Area (Region 20)	\$10.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Central Texas (Region 12)	\$10.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Coastal Bend (Region 2)	\$10.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Crossroads Area (Region 3)	\$10.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Houston Suburban (Region 4)	\$10.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> North Central (Region 10)	\$10.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Panhandle (Region 16)	\$10.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Paso Del Norte (Region 19)	\$15.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Piney Woods (Region 7)	\$00.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Rio Grande Valley (Region 1)	\$10.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Sabine-Neches (Region 5)	\$10.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> West Central Texas (Region 14)	\$20.00	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Trinity River (Region 11)	\$20.00	\$ _____

**TOTAL** \$ \_\_\_\_\_

### Payment Options

☐ Payroll Deduction (Complete authorization below and deliver to your employer.) ☐ Check Enclosed (Please make check payable to Texas ASCD)

☐ Credit Card (complete information below) ☐ Purchase Order # \_\_\_\_\_

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Credit Card #: \_\_\_\_\_

Expiration Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Payroll Deduction Authorization

I, \_\_\_\_\_ authorize the \_\_\_\_\_ (employer) to deduct the total amount of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ in order to pay for Texas ASCD membership dues. I further authorize the Association to notify the employer of changes in the annual dues amounts and the number of pay periods over which deductions shall be made. Upon termination of my employment, I authorize any unpaid balance to be deducted from my final check. This authorization, for the deductions referenced above, will continue in effect until I give notice to the employer to revoke.

Employee Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Social Security # \_\_\_\_\_

Employer \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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