



Education Consumers Foundation

Third Annual Value-Added Achievement Awards

State Capitol
Nashville, Tennessee
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Remarks of J. E. Stone, President
Education Consumers Foundation

Thank-you Brett, and thank all of you for being here today.

Ladies and gentlemen, today we honor the leaders of Tennessee's top-performing elementary and middle schools, so I want to take these few minutes to talk about what they had to overcome to become top-performers and the vital importance of what they are doing for Tennessee's economic future.

New Policies, New Realities

In January of this year, the State Board of Education enacted a new and more rigorous set of high school graduation requirements—ones designed to prepare students for college or the workplace. Of particular importance, the new requirements are designed to prepare all students for postsecondary study—regardless of whether they plan to attend college.

In effect, the Board recognized that in today's world, the educational requirements for success in college and in the workplace are essentially the same.

The Board's new policy came about as the result of a series of regional discussions with employers—led by Governor Bredesen. What the Governor learned from employers across Tennessee is that there are significant gaps between the skill levels of Tennessee's high school graduates and those needed by employers.

The Governor's assessment was accompanied by a survey conducted by the Business Roundtable. Relevant to what I will be telling you about the principals we are honoring, a close reading of this report shows that very many of the deficiencies it identifies are elementary and middle school level skills.

The existence of these educational deficiencies may seem like a small and isolated issue, but in truth, they are a grave problem. They are the tip of an educational iceberg that will ultimately sink Tennessee's prosperity and living standards. We are in competition with

countries around the world. It is true as Thomas Friedman has so famously said, the world is flat.

The Board also drew guidance from a nationwide educational improvement initiative called the American Diploma Project. The ADP and its Tennessee incarnation—the Tennessee Diploma Project—basically seeks to close the noted educational gaps by aligning high school standards with the demands of college and the workplace and by holding high schools and colleges accountable for bringing students up to speed.

So far, so good. We now have appropriate standards, but what must happen in Tennessee’s high school classrooms?

This is where the importance of our honorees and their accomplishments becomes evident.

Tennessee and other states face a very challenging educational reality. Approximately 75% of the students entering our high schools are not academically ready for high school. In the words of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (aka, the Nation’s Report Card), they are “below proficient.”

Before I go further, you may wonder how such a situation could have been permitted to exist. The answer is that Tennessee and other states have been using high school graduation standards that simply do not match the knowledge and skill levels necessary for success at the next level. According to the standards Tennessee has been using, about 90% of our students are reaching the proficient level.

In fact, nearly 40% of recent high school graduates entering Tennessee’s 4-year colleges and universities need remedial or developmental studies. Around 70% of the students entering Tennessee’s community colleges need the same. These numbers have been creeping up for years and they are a manifestation of problem that Governor Bredesen and the Tennessee Diploma Project are working to correct.

I might add that I am not just citing some statistical abstract. Over the last thirty years, I have taught thousands of college freshmen and sophomores and I can tell you that these percentages are a visible fact. Every year I have seen more students who struggle with reading, math, and general knowledge—again, many of these “gaps” are in skills that are taught in elementary and middle schools.

Why the Work of Our Principals is so Important

Ladies and gentlemen, the principals you see here today are the leaders of the top performing schools in Tennessee. Their schools are living proof that the educational problems we face can be overcome.

Let me explain what they do and why it is so critical to our future.

The gaps in knowledge and skills that we see at the high school level do not originate at the high school level, and in truth, they are very difficult to remediate at that level.

Neither do these gaps originate at the elementary and middle school levels. As experienced teachers can tell you, the academic trajectory of most children can be predicted from about the 3rd grade.

In truth, most of the differences we see among children are evident from the earliest days of kindergarten.

For a variety of reasons, ranging from parenting practices to living conditions, to health and nutrition issues, to social, cultural, and developmental factors, and so forth, there is about 6 grade-level range in school readiness among children entering kindergarten. Some children are as much as 3 years ahead of their peers and others are as much as 3 years behind.

The percentages of students at each level of readiness vary from school to school, but it is typical for schools to have to deal with a 6 grade-level range of student readiness.

BTW, I am drawing these numbers from an excellent book on this topic:

Annual Growth, Catch-Up Growth by Fielding, Kerr, and Rosier. It describes how the Kennewick, Washington school district brought 90% of its students, district-wide, to grade level in reading. A full citation is available on our website.

For the 40% of kindergartners who are up to 3 years behind—meaning that they may not know any letters or numbers, can't sit still for 5 minutes, etc.--one year of academic growth per year of school attendance is not enough.

In order for these children to have any real chance of school success, they have to experience greater academic growth than their peers. For example, in reading, these children must experience as much as 2 or 3 years of academic growth per school year to catch up with their peers by grade 3.

These are the children for whom schools like those headed by our honorees are especially important. And not incidentally, these are the children for whom Tennessee's emerging preschool initiative is of great importance.

If these children do not catch up, their ability to benefit from their subsequent school experiences is greatly diminished. Around the third grade, school learning shifts from learning to read to reading to learn; and kids who are not proficient in reading and the other basics simply miss more and more as time goes on. As a colleague of mine says, each missed competency is like a brick on their back. Over time, the load simply becomes unbearable.

The principals you see here are the leaders of schools that are the best in Tennessee in addressing this problem. Again, they are living demonstrations that schools with effective leaders and using effective methodologies can provide the needed catch-up growth.

Here is why their accomplishments in elementary and middle schools are so critical to reaching Tennessee's workforce development aims.

Classroom reality dictates that catching-up has to be done in the earliest stages of schooling. There is simply no way for high schools and colleges to overcome in a few semesters, the learning deficiencies that have cumulated in the preceding 8 or 12 years. There just are not enough hours in the day or days in the year--and time is not the biggest issue.

There is also the matter of student effort and dedication to learning.

It is one thing to get a 7 or 8 year old to spend the time necessary to double his or her rate of academic growth. It something else entirely to elicit that much effort from a high school student.

Learning takes study, and study takes time and effort. Students live in a world of competing attractions. The level of student commitment needed for catching up a grade level or two requires the kind of dedication found in monasteries, not high schools.

Realistically, the only way that Tennessee's school systems are going to make a significant dent in the number of graduates who are college and workforce ready is by substantially increasing the percentage of students who are ready to enter high school. If 75% instead of 25% of entering high school students were proficient, the problem would be far more manageable.

However, in order for 75% of 8th graders to be ready for high school, approximately 40% of students attending Tennessee's elementary and middle schools will have to progress at a rate greater than one year of academic growth per year in school—especially at the preK-3 level.

This is what I mean by “catch-up growth,” and it is this kind of growth rate that is being produced by the principals and schools we honor here today.

The Challenges They Have Had to Overcome

I want to spend these closing minutes in discussing some of the challenges that our top-performing principals have had to overcome.

Last year, the Education Consumers Foundation sent a researcher to visit the 6 principals who had won our award two years in a row.

BTW, one of them—Curtis Wells of Joppa Elementary in Grainger County—is here for a third time.

Congratulations Curtis!

The purpose of our study was to learn what makes these schools so effective.

The report summarizing our findings is titled [Effective Schools, Common Practices](#). It is available through our website, and it found that these 6 principals had about a dozen schooling practices in common. We can't say that these 12 practices were solely responsible

for their success, but the fact of their commonality is a good indication that they played some significant role.

What struck me in considering these practices is the instructional leadership it must have taken to introduce them to their schools. Many of the practices identified in our report were developed and tested decades ago, but never widely accepted because of their single-minded focus on learning. The federally-funded Follow Through project of the sixties and seventies, for example, produced an enormously effective teaching technology called Direct Instruction; but it was never widely adopted because most educational leaders were focused on the social and cultural aspects of schooling, not the academic ones.

Social and cultural issues remain a centerpiece within the professional education community, but state and federal reform initiatives have made academic outcomes an unequivocal priority in schools; so given the context, the accomplishments of our winning principals are all the more remarkable.

Let me highlight two practices whose implementation I found to be especially impressive because I know they would have called for extensive rethinking and relearning by everyone in a school.

First, the top-performing schools assessed student performance as often as weekly and used the data to guide their classroom-level decisionmaking. In other words, these principals and teachers tracked student progress almost continuously and made sure that, indeed, no child was being left behind. If more teaching or different teaching was required, they would make the necessary adjustments and work with the child until they achieved mastery.

This kind of data-based instructional decision-making was virtually unknown in schools a decade ago and neither is it a typical part of the pre-service training received by teachers and administrators. For that matter, training in the use of Tennessee's value-added assessment system—the database on which our awards are based—has yet to be included in Tennessee's teacher education programs.

So, in order to move their schools to a data-based approach, our top-performing principals had to be true instructional leaders. They had to ensure that they personally were well-versed in student assessment and data analysis, and they had to ensure that everyone on their staff was on-board regarding the importance of collecting and using data as a guide to classroom decisions.

The learning curve had to be steep. Data-based instructional decisionmaking is a break with tradition. It involves skills that are not in the skillsets of most teachers and administrators. It is an approach to schooling that runs counter to the conventional pedagogical wisdom.

BTW, the Tennessee Department of Education deserves great credit for providing training and support. I believe that the Department's workshops on the use of value-added data gave a much needed boost to the use of effective schooling practices statewide.

The second instance of leadership that I found remarkable was the adoption of research-based teaching practices at most of these schools.

For schools to produce catch-up rates of achievement growth, they have to use teaching interventions that have proven effectiveness, and they have to implement them in the earliest stages of schooling.

Children who need to progress at 2 or 3 times the average rate of achievement growth simply do not have time to waste on learning activities that are less than optimal. They need teachers who are either well experienced in producing results or ones who have been trained in proven practices.

Here again, I am confident that many of our principals had a steep uphill climb. As a generalization, the use of research-based teaching practices is not emphasized in elementary teacher training programs—especially in the programs that train preK - 3 teachers. In fact, even the testing of children prior to grade 3 is controversial to many early childhood educators.

To the contrary, training for elementary teachers has, until very recently, focused less on ensuring student skills than on the hypothetical risks of children being expected to achieve overly ambitious curricular goals. Even today, preK – 3 teachers are taught about the dangers of the so called “push-down curriculum” and “developmentally inappropriate practice.” In fact, up until a few years ago, national standards for best teaching practice at the preschool level counseled against systematically teaching the ABCs.

Again, my point is that our principals had to be effective instructional leaders. They had to inform themselves about effective teaching methodologies and they had to convince sometimes hesitant colleagues that there is a better way. And again, much credit goes to the Tennessee Department of Education for its support and professional development.

Effective schooling is efficient schooling, and it conserves more than mere dollars. It conserves Tennessee’s most precious commodity: The futures of our children.

In Closing

The implementation of data-based decisionmaking, research-based teaching, and all of the other practices necessary to produce catch-up growth may remain a challenge for years to come. The good news, however, is that Tennessee has a measurement system that permits us to see our progress and see which schools are leading the way.

More than virtually any other members of the team that is public education, the principals assembled here today deserve to be recognized for providing the needed leadership.

Thank-you.