THE STALLED RACE TO CLOSE LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT GAPS:
FEDERALLY LEGISLATING PUBLIC EDUCATION

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Recently an elementary school friend posted a question on Facebook: Does anyone remember Jack Smith?¹ Over the years, from time to time, I too had thought about Jack. According to the comments that soon racked up it seems that he had made a lasting impression on many of us whom were in class with him at Withrow Elementary School in the 1970s. My former classmates remembered him similarly to how I did - that he didn’t bathe often, wore clothes that were too small, dirty and torn; and shoes with the soles worn through. Reflecting back, it is easy to assume that neither his life at home nor his life at school was meeting his needs, although none of us knew for certain. As my former classmates commented about this online, expressing guilt and regret about how he was treated, someone stated that they hoped Jack was somewhere having a great life. I hoped so, too. But it was the last statement written that stuck with me, “I wonder why no one did anything to help him.” There was no response.

The truth is that attending Withrow,² a school that was predominantly white and middle class, was supposed to, in theory, “help” Jack and the other children, mainly African-African, who were bussed from economically disadvantaged areas around Akron. James Coleman noted as much in the 1966 Equality of Educational Opportunity

¹ The name Jack Smith is a pseudonym.
² Withrow Elementary School is a pseudonym.
report. Commissioned as part of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the research indicated that a student’s home life was a significant factor affecting success, but also that, “The social composition of the student body is more highly related to achievement, independent of the student’s own social background, than any school factor” (Rumberger 2019). According to the study, there was an increase in student performance when black students attended predominantly white schools with students of a higher economic status, although it is unclear why (Petersen). Therefore, according to Coleman’s findings at the time, and the fact that the student population at Withrow School had been white and middle-class, an increase should have been noted in the achievement level for the transferred students.

The fact that Coleman’s research at that time found the background and expectations of students’ peers could also influence scholastic achievement was an interesting concept. If it were accurate, again in theory, it meant that there was an opportunity to help students, possibly combating cycles of poverty, by changing the make-up of schools.3 Not unlike issues plaguing school districts today, in the 1970s and 1980s there was a disparity in achievement between predominantly white and predominantly black schools, with research indicating that white students, as well as African-American students, attending school in suburban areas faring better than their urban peers (Hochschild 25-26). Based on the research from that period, an assumption could be made that the academic achievement of the bused Akron students would improve. Although, at the time, the Akron Board of Education did not give top billing to the use of busing as a solution to desegregate the schools. First and foremost it was a remedy for their aging, under-populated schools (Akron Plan). However, considering the

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3 Coleman changed some of his arguments based on the occurrence of white students departing from integrated schools.
bigger political picture of the day, it is not difficult to make the assertion that integration was more than just an added benefit of money-saving building closures.

Years after Brown v. Board of Education, and on the heels of the Civil Rights Act, the federal government appeared to be more focused on education policy than ever before in history. In a country with a federal constitution that does not mention education as a right, let alone any guarantee to provide or fund it, this began a new era of significant federal involvement in public education that would continue and increase over the years. Prior to this, scares about widespread illiteracy in U.S. servicemen led to attempts to pass bills focusing on increased funding and requirements for schools, but ultimately failed to garner enough votes to be enacted. Aside from funding provided for vocational education, schools greatly affected by war (Cross 6-8), or for purposes of higher education; including the G.I. Bill of Rights, the federal role in public school education was limited. Attempts were made but, not surprisingly, political differences and individual agendas served as roadblocks to stop federal funding becoming far-reaching throughout the 1950s. 

With no constitutional designation for education, the founding fathers likely envisioned local agencies teaching their own. Certainly and unfortunately, this left immigrant and African-American children to pay a steep price. Ramifications of leaving decision making to local education agencies were “separate but equal” schools in which the equality was questionable, or increased vocational schooling opportunities for African American students instead of the college-prep curriculum white public school students generally received (McCluskey, 28). With the need for federal dollars to help re-build

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4 National Defense Education Act (NDEA) was signed into law 1958.
overcrowded schools, education was on the federal political horizon through the mid-1950s, but to no avail. Bills that would have allocated federal funds to build new schools repeatedly failed to be enacted because of the addition of the Powell Amendment.\textsuperscript{5} The failure generally came at the hands of Southern representatives whose votes made it evident that severe overcrowding was less of a problem for their constituents than black and white students attending school together. (Cross 8-12). Before too long, that would change.

Desegregation legislation was looming, but it was not the only education issue facing Congress. Civil rights issues aside, Republicans and Democrats could not agree whether or not giving federal dollars to public schools could be done without asserting control. Basically, federally aiding public schools was viewed as an expansion of government, so the familiar big, over-spending government vs. small, efficient government argument was front-and-center as well. In the midst of such debates, something occurred that temporarily put partisan posturing aside: the Soviet Union launched Sputnik into orbit. Doing so not only hastened the space race, but was also behind the creation and passage of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). The goal of the NDEA was to encourage students to study math and science by allocating federal funding to states in order to promote this agenda. According to Neal McCluskey, the blame for lagging behind the United States’ cold war adversary was placed on supposed progressive education practices of the day (21). In light of Sputnik, it is easy to understand why the NDEA appealed to and was passed by legislators, as it seemed to be an opportunity to finally make a mark in terms of education, even to possibly enact

\textsuperscript{5} The Powell Amendment was anti-discrimination amendment written by John Clayton Powell that blocked segregated schools from receiving federal funding.
change without approving the full conditions of the Powell Amendment. Some expressed
disapproval, with Barry Goldwater stating, “If adopted, the legislation will mark the
inception of aid, supervision, and ultimately control of education in this country by the
federal authorities” (Mccluskey 21). Although it was stated in the act that federal control
of education was forbidden, his words would eventually ring true.

As if there were not enough barriers to federal support at this time, the role of
religion further stalled school aid bills. Whether it was a debate about prayer in school or
if aid should extend to parochial schools, the placement of religious issues into a bill also
sealed its fate. While it may not sound much different than today’s issues with prayer in
school, in this instance it served as yet another political obstacle to federal aid reaching
schools. Depending on individual views held by legislators as to what degree, if any,
federal government involvement in public education was acceptable; each rejection of
assistance could be viewed as a victory or a failure. However, with the creation of an
education task force under President John F. Kennedy, which focused on school aid, it
became inevitable that expanded federal funding would come to pass (Cross 17-20). And,
just days before his assassination, Kennedy met with the National Education Association
(NEA) leaders to thank them for finally allowing a higher education bill to pass free of
controversial religious roadblocks (Cross 21). It served as a turning point, and as Lyndon
B. Johnson became president amidst tragedy, he did not waste any time continuing to
champion Kennedy’s causes.

Over the next six years a number of civil rights laws, including the Civil Rights
Act, as well as school laws, were passed. Desegregation was no longer just an added
provision to a school construction bill; it was required. “The 1964 Civil Rights Act
permitted the federal government to cut off funds from school districts that discriminated and enabled the attorney general to sue on behalf of individual students” (Hochschild 33). Schools needed the funding that would be available within the following year, and the government was finally ready to take action against those who refused to comply with the law. In spite of Brown v. Board, by 1964 there were only “1.2% percent of black children in the eleven segregationist states attending schools with whites” (McCluskey 41). Retrospectively, it is clear that desegregation would continue to be a long, slow process.

Previously, the majority of school aide bills had focused on reconstruction or teacher salaries, but with the passage of the Civil Rights Act there was a shift in legislation towards desegregation and aid to disadvantaged youth, which was a logical step considering Johnson’s war on poverty. The landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) signed in to law in 1965 would allocate unprecedented funding to public schools in predominantly disadvantaged areas, with the intent to aid impoverished children. Not only was it the first time substantial federal money, over 2 billion dollars for 1965-1966, had been so widely disseminated to aid schools, as some lawmakers had warned, it set the precedent for increased funding and control that would continue to increase over the next 40 years. Neal McCluskey put it in perspective:

In the 176 years between the Constitution’s enactment and birth of the ESEA, the federal government passed just forty-one laws establishing federal programs for education and related activities, and few of those touched the nation’s elementary and secondary schools. In the thirty-nine years from the ESEA’s passage through 2005, the federal government enacted 117 such laws. (42)

While the money allocated for schools was groundbreaking, especially Title I of ESEA, which had the highest concentration of funding, the provisions forth set within prohibited
any federal control over the curriculum or the classroom. Clearly, that would change over time as well, but at this point, the focus was on access.

It was access, or the “opportunity to learn” that laid the groundwork for ESEA and the Title I initiatives. Johnson’s Gardner Task Force on education, in their 1964 report on the state of the schools, had questioned the amount of access to education that impoverished children had (Cross 22). In line with Johnson’s vision of The Great Society, the task force noted and made a commitment to fight poverty and improve education for children from low-income areas. Finding that opportunity itself, or lack thereof, was the most significant barrier impoverished children faced, the report concluded: “Generations of Americans have preceded us in this concern; indeed it is the most powerful theme in our educational history. Yet, even today, children of disadvantaged backgrounds are deprived of normal access to educational opportunity” (Cross 24). It is a theme that stuck, and one that has continued to be tied to education reform and legislation. The task force, not unlike current day lawmakers, also seemed perplexed as to what to change in order to have financially disadvantaged students performing on par with their middle class peers. According to the task force report, the poor neighborhoods in which the impoverished students lived did not lend itself to the best teaching environment; reasoning that “the schools are very probably (emphasis mine) inferior in quality, and it is not easy for them to attract good teachers” (Cross 24). It is interesting to note that this could be considered foreshadowing, as almost 50 years later the same conclusions are being drawn.
While the majority of the ESEA dollars were intended to aid the students and schools most in need, within a few years of the act passing over half the districts in the country were receiving some Title I funding (McCluskey 42). On one hand it brings to light questions about whether or not the aid was being apportioned as initially intended, and on the other it meant that all the districts receiving the funding had to make an active effort to desegregate. The fact that the Civil Rights Bill and ESEA were enacted chronologically close has forever cemented desegregation and federal aid together. Considering Supreme Court rulings prior to this time had minimal affect on integration, it is still difficult to say whether or not some districts would have taken steps to integrate without an incentive program. However, at this point in history in areas where the process was slow, the federal government intervened again with Supreme Court rulings determining forced busing would be an appropriate measure to ensure the commencement of the integration process for districts with de jure segregation, as well as those with de facto.

Busing may have seemed like a suitable two-fold solution to help schools uphold the law, as well as achieve racial balance. Even with the assumption of positive intent there seems to be something fundamentally unsettling about it. Perhaps it is because the court-ordered busing almost exclusively sent African-American students to schools with predominantly white student populations. If districts had chosen to run buses the reverse direction, taking white students and the supposedly more qualified teachers to predominantly African-American schools, would white parents have stood for it? As a student discusses a similar scenario in Savage Inequalities, she points out that those

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6 There were also fewer school districts as local agencies merged, which meant that most districts would have some Title I eligible students.
attending school in predominantly white, middle-class Fairview Heights, Illinois would not be eager to attend school in East St. Louis for example, a district with a current graduation rate of just under 11% (Local). She explained that even if East St. Louis had state-of-the-art technology available, if given a choice, “The buses going to Fairview Heights would be all full. The buses coming to East St. Louis would be empty” (32). Not only did the busing seem to send a message, inadvertent as it may have been, that the African-American students had had an inferior product, but it raised complex issues about access and equality.

In Akron similar busing patterns were put into place, but the busing was not court ordered. Although, prior to this time the district did face and win two federal lawsuits, both of which focused on whether or not Akron was intentionally segregating schools through district zoning (ABJ). Since those cases put a spotlight on the racial divide in Akron schools, there was conjecture that court ordered desegregation may be imminent, as it had been in other northern cities. As previously mentioned, the stance of Akron Public Schools was that the board decided to close schools due to declining attendance and poor building conditions. Along with those closings the plan proposed that the district would be “improving majority/minority pupil ratio through student reassignment” (Akron). In other words it was viewed as win-win by the school board -budget saving building closures and a peaceful integration processing in one full swoop, all with the added benefit of grant assistance. On a document reviewing the process - The Akron Plan – A Historical Perspective - it is noted that other districts would likely emulate Akron for the relatively peaceful method used to ultimately reassign almost four thousand students and close eight neighborhood schools.
Busing was a hot button issue in several cities, and while the school board in Akron did face some backlash it was a smooth process logistically. What the students and families dealt with personally is another issue. I was 7 or 8 years old when the first group of students transferred into Withrow via bus and I still remember it. My mother, a former teacher, had lamented about the children having to stand at bus stops in the dark waiting to face a long ride before starting school each morning. I recall that the transferred students were referred to as *bus kids* by the principal on morning announcements and throughout the day by the teachers. The *bus kids* had to stand apart in what was called the *free lunch* line to receive a meal ticket every day at school, and line up separately at dismissal. Purposely or not, the transfer students were set apart. These memories must have been significant to me, as I still remember them clearly. I can only imagine the impact it must have had for the students on the receiving end of it.

Historically speaking, busing seemed to be on the front end of what was to become a comfortable pattern: federal intervention on behalf of underprivileged children put into place without producing the desired results. One issue that challenged integrated schools was the white flight phenomenon. Although polls show that white people overwhelmingly agree that white and black children should attend school together (Hochschild, 43), it seems that this belief often applies to other people’s children, as

Whites in fact sometimes make fairly drastic steps to avoid putting their children in racially mixed schools. Many have changed schools or moved to avoid it, and …whites who lack other public school choices are more likely to send their children to private school as the proportion of blacks in their schools increases. Whites who move out of cities usually choose suburbs whose schools are “whiter.” (Hochschild 45)

This has also occurred in Akron schools in spite of parameters put in place to avoid white flight. Stipulations were put in place that prevented white students from transferring to
another district during open enrollment, although in 1996 a federal court ruling found it to be unconstitutional (Legal). However, over time it seems that many white families, but certainly not all, moved from the Akron school district or sent their children to private schools.

Again, it comes back to access – a concept that is hard to put into action as it often involves variables that cannot be controlled. As federal legislators tried to grant access to minorities and underprivileged children, the landscape changed. As the landscape changed, over several administrations the legislation would change too. ESEA faced several reauthorizations, which were shaped by current presidents as well as fears the country held about the state of education. In 1974 for example, under President Richard Nixon, changes to ESEA made it possible for Title I funding to be even more widely available than before (McCluskey 48). This change happened to follow the trend of representatives trying to garner more and more funding for schools in their respective districts.

In terms of education policy, Johnson made it more than apparent that the president has significant influence over it. In fact, after he initially opened the door for federal spending on public education, the numbers continued to increase with each administration. During Jimmy Carter’s years in the White House, amid some controversy and pressure from the National Education Association (NEA), he created the Department of Education at the cabinet level, which required a substantial budget. Additionally, he approved federal spending increases for education by expanding Title I; asking for more money each year of his term (Cross 70). This may have fit the high-spending stereotype
associated with Democrats, but even Ronald Reagan found himself in a situation that altered his vow to reduce education spending.

Initially Reagan planned to dismantle the Department of Education and made attempts to decrease the annual education budget. That changed, however with the release of *A Nation at Risk*. The report cautioned, “what was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments” (*Nation*). It struck a collective nerve in the country, as Americans were once again reminded of educational shortcomings. For Reagan, it was not the time to cut spending, and, “between 1984 and 1988, discretionary spending by the Department of Education rose 19 percent…to more than $16 billion” (McCluskey 56). At the inception of ESEA the majority of funding was intended to aid disadvantaged students, but it seemed to be the perceived solution to the education decline the U.S. was facing.

More spending was to follow as the reauthorization of ESEA in 1988 was in the hands of a Democratic majority senate. Aside from an expansion of programs that had been condensed to a mere seven in 1981, it was significant for another reason: proficiency. In spite of the fact the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) had been established years before, this was the first reauthorization that required states to set an expected achievement level for Title I students, as well as identify schools in which students did not meet that level (Cross 88). The concept of setting achievement standards, along with increasing funding and federal control to problem solve, laid the ground work for future legislation, which was evident during the course of the next two administrations. Surprisingly, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton held views on education that were so similar in nature that their education initiatives were almost
identical. Clinton’s Goals 2000 offered schools monetary incentives to accept voluntary federal standards, and by the 1994 ESEA reauthorization, Title I funding was also dependent on compliance. States were required to create education plans coordinating with the “voluntary” standards (McCluskey, 62). As all previous legislation had, with increased funding and control, it set the stage for what was to come – No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the 2001 reauthorization of ESEA.

George W. Bush was the strength behind the well-known, highly-touted-turned-highly-criticized No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. It was groundbreaking legislation for many reasons, but mainly because it asserted control over the public education system like never before, bringing together all dimensions of past legislation. The act had the massive federal funding, the federally approved state standards, the proficiency requirements determined by high stakes testing, and the state and local control tied to financial incentive, all surprisingly initiated by a Republican president. The NCLB Parent’s Guide takes the 600+ pages of the act, and summarizes it as follows:

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is a landmark in education reform designed to improve student achievement and…in amending ESEA, the new law represents a sweeping overhaul of federal efforts to support elementary and secondary education in the United States. It is built on four common-sense pillars: accountability for results; an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research; expanded parental options; and expanded local control and flexibility. (Ed. Gov)

While states were granted some control over their own schools, the permission was detailed within the act. States were given the flexibility to define their own standards and achievement levels, as well as design their own assessments, but it was subject to federal approval (Charting). In theory, or rather on paper, NCLB was a step in the right direction. As education laws had before, there was a definite aim to break the barrier that was
preventing impoverished students from achieving at the level of their peers; seemingly an attempt to level the playing field by making all things equal. Many promises were made when NCLB was signed into law and certainly, as with all past federal education legislation, there is no shortage of angles or topics that could be used to consider and critique it.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how the federal government has failed to bring about any significant change in achievement gaps despite legislative attempts that span almost 50 years. In turn, questions are raised about the accuracy of the high-stakes accountability testing, and whether or not the federal legislation takes into account the harsh effects of poverty. My interest in this topic - achievement gaps, poverty, and the federal role in education - was sparked initially by spending time in the city and suburban schools of Chicago, and later as a substitute teacher in Akron Public Schools (APS). In an attempt to look at some issues that were brought to light by that experience, I did so on a very small scale, with a very small lens. I chose this approach as a way to establish how aspects of extensive federal initiatives translate to the local level, to local schools. It was not my intent to make any bold, all-encompassing statements about the federal role in education, but rather to research some of the inconsistencies, decision-making and issues relating to closing the unremitting achievement gaps by coming full-circle back to a school district that is quite familiar to me.

In Chapter II, I will look at achievement gaps through the lens of two Akron elementary schools in which there are notable differences in test scores between the predominantly middle-class students at Taft Elementary\textsuperscript{7} and their economically

\textsuperscript{7} Taft Elementary is a pseudonym.
disadvantaged peers at Alcott Elementary\textsuperscript{8}. Again, utilizing a small-scale perspective, the Ohio Achievement Assessments (OAA) reading and writing test scores of the two schools are compared with a focus on poverty as a central issue. This chapter also touches on the assertion that students in poor neighborhoods have inferior materials to work with and less qualified teachers to educate them and, as a result, underperform in school. By evaluating test score data, as well as interviewing teachers from the respective schools, it seemed that all things were fairly equal educationally in this limited comparison. Taking into account the fact that the assessment results fall on the shoulders of the teachers, is enough attention being paid to the role of poverty? Consideration is given to the work of Paul Tough, who in his book, \textit{How Children Succeed}, asserts that the breakdown between teaching and learning is underdeveloped cognitive skills and strategies in the economically disadvantaged students, noting that this has nothing to do with level of intelligence. Additionally, current scientific research on learning differences are addressed, which seems to indicate that poor students may be facing physiological barriers that are not addressed by intervention strategies set forth in Title I.

In Chapter III, the focus shifts to compare the content and results of two reading tests required by federal education initiatives. One is a state test, the Ohio Achievement Assessment (OAA), and the other is the National Assessment of Educational Progress test (NAEP). Both have components that test reading aptitude, but prove to differ greatly when the make-up, guidelines, results and consequences of the two are evaluated by the proficiency rates of Ohio grade 4 and grade 8 students. The state testing results reflect a significantly higher proficiency rate than the national test, raising questions as to which

\textsuperscript{8} Alcott Elementary is a pseudonym.
test, if either, is accurate. A significant amount of data is compared, such as test questions and standards, no stakes tests vs. high stakes tests, and the achievement gaps, which are evident in both test results. With scores serving as the single most referenced indicator of student success, and a static achievement gap that is central to the education crisis, it is vital that testing is as accurate as possible.

In Chapter IV, I will review sanctions associated with NCLB and describe similarities to current federal education reform, including Elementary and Secondary Education Act Flexibility (ESEA Flexibility) and Race to the Top, as well as the Common Core State Standards Initiative. Following in the footsteps of past federal education law, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was not successful in closing achievement gaps or raising test scores for impoverished students. A high percentage of schools failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress, and faced ramifications as a result of poor performances, ultimately leading to the highest decrease in teacher job satisfaction in over 20 years (MetLife). Under President Barack Obama, there has not yet been a full reauthorization of ESEA, but new reform initiatives were passed giving states the option of applying for ESEA Flexibility waivers that released participating states from some aspects of NCLB law in exchange for meeting federal requirements. Additionally, states could compete for federal funding in the Race to the Top program, again in exchange for agreeing to certain conditions set forth by the Department of Education. While the programs may first appear to be different than past education reform legislation, many components are similar to those that have failed in the past. The focus remains on closing the unrelenting achievement gaps, which now affects more students on the basis of
economics than race. Critics note that the programs fail to address the harsh effects of poverty, and therefore put unrealistic expectations on teachers and students.

My conclusion addresses the notion that education reform cannot solve the effects of poverty that are evident on a daily basis in our schools. Until the consequences of poverty are acknowledged and the failure of universal solutions is accepted, narrowing the achievement gap remains unlikely. With new education reform programs seemingly drawing on past legislation in terms of testing, expanding federal control and a one-size-fits-all approach, it is hard to imagine a successful outcome, especially considering teachers’ jobs will be dependent on student test performance. So, for now, there are a high percentage of public school students who are classified as impoverished and continue to underperform and take mandated tests amidst education reform programs that miss the mark. Since federal involvement in public education continues to expand, it is necessary to change the focus in order to have any chance of changing the results.
CHAPTER II

HIGH POVERTY RATES AND LOW LITERACY SCORES

There is a literacy achievement gap in this country. Impoverished students have weaker literacy skills when compared to their middle class counterparts. Performance discrepancies, and possible solutions for them, are likely the most researched and elusive problem facing education. Based on the data that often includes some of the lowest achieving schools in the country, it is easy to envision a gap between urban school districts in cities like Chicago, or even Cleveland, and their respective surrounding middle class suburbs. However, it is a far-reaching issue plaguing smaller cities as well where the socioeconomic division does not necessarily run parallel with the city limits, and it is especially evident in Akron. The literacy achievement gaps, both racial and economic, are consistent on this small scale, as evidenced by comparisons between two Akron Public Schools. Alcott Elementary, with a student population made-up primarily of economically disadvantaged students, was compared to Taft Elementary, with a population of mostly middleclass students. Third and fourth grade state reading and writing proficiency test scores, as well as teacher qualifications and commentary, were the tools by which the comparison was made.

Not surprisingly, the test scores show the expected achievement gaps. Although it is not without exception, following the common course, the results indicate that the
students who attend Taft outperform the Alcott students on reading and writing proficiency tests. Based on the socioeconomic make-up of the schools shown on a chart below, it seems apparent that these tests represent a connection between poverty and, for the majority of students, the literacy skills necessary to score a proficient rating on the Ohio Achievement Assessment (OAA). Instead of looking at the problem as simply a disparity of language or unfamiliar content used on the tests, this essay seeks to bring to light the effects of poverty in relation to how students learn as a possible factor. The accountability testing, which is a central part of federal education law, is high stakes in nature, meaning that schools not meeting proficiency requirements could lose federal funding flexibility and face low ratings, while teachers can be labeled as ineffective and lose jobs, among other consequences. While the legislation is meant to help impoverished students, the blame for low achievement is often levied on teachers or schools, while the role poverty plays is often overlooked.

While comparing the third and fourth grade literacy achievement gap at these particular schools, some commonly held notions were called into question. First, an argument is often made that the condition of school buildings affects the learning environment, giving middleclass students the advantage. In this case, however, the 2003-2004 testing that was compared occurred when both schools were outdated with limited access to current technology. Second, according to the teachers, the grade-appropriate Harcourt Language Arts curricular materials used at the time were required in all Akron Public Schools, which eliminates the argument that substandard materials were a factor. Last, the argument that an impoverished school has less qualified teachers is not valid in

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9 Alcottt Elementary and Taft Elementary have both been rebuilt.
this instance either. Federal law required teachers to meet certain educational criteria in order to be deemed “highly qualified.” In accordance with that law, both professionals interviewed met the criteria necessary to be certified as such. In fact, both teachers interviewed have extremely similar experience, qualifications and professional evaluations, as described later in this section. Without those topics appearing front-and-center in this case, socioeconomics stands as the most significant difference between the two schools.

For the record, the distance between the two schools is just over a mile. The close proximity does not give any insight into just how different they are in relation economic status. The differences are, however, reflected in the reading and writing proficiency test scores, which are documented and released annually on the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) School Report Cards. These report cards detail the state test scores for each school, the number of state indicators that were met, as well as a breakdown of student population, teacher education, and percentage of students classified as economically disadvantaged. Although it does not answer the question why, it is a specific way to compare the literacy achievement gap between the schools.

The table below, for example, details the differences in both reading and writing test scores, with third grade reading scores showing the largest discrepancy.
Table 2.1
Percentage of students scoring proficient or above

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<tr>
<td>ALCOTT</td>
<td>53.3</td>
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<td>72.1</td>
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Table 2.2
Percentages of racial/ economic make-up

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<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>African-American</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Multi-racial</th>
<th>Economically Disadvantaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TAFT</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALCOTT</td>
<td>88.1</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>85.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Further more, these scores only highlight the fact that both reading and writing scores are higher in the school that has a lower percentage of impoverished students, as well as a lower percentage of African-American students. In Ohio this is such an issue that the state has set up a Closing the Achievement Gaps Task Force. It found that, “for every 10 percentage points that the poverty level of the school increases, achievement in reading decreases by 5.6 percentage points” (ODE). If that holds true it is just one more example of the breakdown in the education of minority and economically disadvantaged students.

Based on the charts referenced above, it is evident the economic divide is substantial and pertinent. As Theodore Sizer tells a school principal in *The Violence of* 

\(^{10}\) Writing assessment is the only subjective part of the test since it includes essays and short answer questions, not just multiple choice.
“Tell me about the incomes of your families and I’ll describe your school” (Stuckey 116). While unfortunate, his statement is not surprising. What might be surprising, however, is the high percentage of students who are impoverished and therefore, more likely to have reading and writing difficulties. In 2004, it was estimated that the poverty rate for children living in the United States under the age of 18 was 17.8 percent, which means that 13 million children were living in poverty (U.S. Census). Even more surprising is that the Akron Public School System has a poverty rate that is more than twice the national average with 45 percent of the students qualifying as economically disadvantaged (Ohio). The numbers are staggering when one considers how many students this entails.

The example comparing Taft and Alcott may just be a small representation of this achievement gap, but still looking at it locally, on a slightly larger scale, the results do not change. In comparing the poverty rate and minority percentage of the population in the Akron Public School district to that of Revere Local School district, the same pattern can be seen. In Revere, there is .8 percent poverty compared to 46.1 percent in the Akron Public population. In addition, the minority rate of students attending Revere schools is 1.8 percent, while in Akron it is 52.5 percent. Once again, the proficiency scores show that the more affluent schools perform better with Revere third graders passing state proficiency test in reading at a rate of 94.9 percent to the third graders district wide in Akron Public passing at 70.1 percent (ODE). It is a familiar pattern.

What is the cause of the variance between economically disadvantaged students and middle class students? What can be so different in schools that are just blocks apart? As referenced earlier in this chapter, there are commonly held theories about why
economically disadvantaged students, including a high percentage of African-American and Hispanic children, do not test as well as white, middle-class students. There are those who believe minority students receive an inferior product when it comes to education. This is addressed in *The Spoken Soul* as Jonathan and Russell Rickford describe what it can mean for African-American students, as follows:

> the schools in which speakers of Spoken Soul are concentrated often suffer from…limited funding, poor facilities, and undertrained teachers – and that these contribute significantly to the devastating failure rates of black children nationwide. (Rickford, 179)

Essentially, the same argument can be made for all economically disadvantaged students. It is the subject of Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities* in which he provides astonishing, heart-wrenching details of the injustices he has witnessed in the public schools in the late 1980’s that related to funding, race and poverty. From his vantage point that which is standard for educating the middle-class seems virtually unattainable for the poor. What Kozol experienced is in line with findings made in the 1960s by President Johnson’s education task force, the findings which led to the creation of ESEA, as noted in the introduction.

Rickford and Rickford touch on another well-known theory as to why the achievement gap exists – the language barrier (176-79). Studies show that students who primarily speak African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) have reading and writing difficulties in classrooms that favor or use Standard English exclusively. However, students who first learned to read in AAVE, followed by transitional and then Standard English materials, made significant strides in reading skill level (Rickford 179). In spite of positive results from programs utilizing that pattern of learning, the overwhelmingly negative public opinion about AAVE overshadowed the progress made to such a degree
that schools seem to have abandoned it altogether. Eliminating programs or failing to expand ones that achieve desired results because of societal pressure does not make much sense in a system seeking equality for all. However, it is not unusual for the school-system to favor middle-class values and perceptions.

Ruby K. Payne, author of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, echoes the idea that cultural norms of the middle-class are also those of the public schools. Similar to views held by Rickford and Rickford, it is her premise that a breakdown between teaching and learning occurs because the needs of impoverished students are not specifically addressed (24). Her assessment is broad and can pertain to several components of a student’s education. On the top of that list though would be the training and skill set that a teacher has expressly for instructing poor students. Similar to federal education legislation, Payne explains that since the 1980s academic theory has been based on the premise that if one can teach well enough; the students will learn (89). However, based on the content of particular teacher education programs, many who are “highly qualified” in their field are teaching in poor schools without having had any training specific to students living in poverty. Since “successful teachers in urban poor schools need a strong knowledge base about the effects of poverty on growth and learning…both pre-service and in-service, needs to include just such information” (Gehrke). If the poverty component is not understood and addressed, it would make sense that the training and socioeconomic status of the teacher would shape classroom expectations, most likely in line with standards and expectations familiar to the middle class.
What serves as the norm for impoverished and middle-class students can vary widely, which brings to light the relevance of a child’s background and home life. In relation to schools, rules or norms are the ones of the middle class, which may leave students living in poverty with few points of reference. Similar to views held by Lisa Delpit, Payne argues that students entrenched in generational poverty may need to learn these rules – be taught these rules - not to replace their own, but to gain understanding and options (45). On that note, it seems that the opposite would hold true for educators. Focusing research on how these differences can lead to a breakdown in understanding, and pinpointing characteristics of poverty that affect student learning seems to be essential for educators (and legislators).

Going a step further, another theory on the achievement gap offers compelling research that shows that for some children early exposure to high levels of stress and trauma can ultimately be a determining factor of school success. Researchers on the subject of poverty have a commonly held theory that this type of stress, more common in poor children, can have significant, long-term effects on both physical and emotional wellbeing. For example, a study of more than 700 children, who were patients at a San Francisco clinic, was conducted after it became evident that many faced psychological problems in addition to medical issues (Tough 68). By using a scale of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) divided into ten categories, including different forms of neglect and abuse, and various household dysfunctions, the results indicated that the more adverse experiences a child had faced, the more likely he was to have problems in school (Tough 68, 88). In fact, of those who had faced hardships in 4 or more ACE categories, 51 percent exhibited behavioral or learning problems, compared to just 3 percent who had
faced none (Tough 88). This is another indicator that what a child experiences at home strongly influences school performance.

According to Paul Tough’s research in *How Children Succeed*, kindergarten and Head Start teachers report that the biggest challenge they face is students who cannot control their anger or exhibit self-control (89-90). On the surface it would seem that perhaps students who face difficulties at home are acting out their frustrations at school. However, according to recent studies, it is deeper than that.

Stress physiologists have found…the part of the brain most affected by early stress is the prefrontal cortex, which is critical in self-regulatory activities of all kinds, both emotional and cognitive. As a result, children who grow up in stressful environments generally find it harder to concentrate…sit still…rebound from disappointment and…follow directions. (Tough 89)

There is a parallel between aspects of behavior reported by teachers and the known affects of high stress exposure to the prefrontal cortex. While the explanation seems simplistic, the process involves complex brain function in the prefrontal cortex, which ”subserves our highest-order cognitive abilities,” and “is also the brain region that is most sensitive to the detrimental effects of stress exposure” (Arnsten). While this research does not in any way suggest that every child who grows up in poverty does or will face these challenges, it seems to indicate that there is a higher possibility based on the effects of increased exposure to stress and trauma.

This theory is not entirely new, as one of the first studies researching the effect of stress on performance and cognitive abilities focused on pilots after World War II (Arnsten). However, the current studies do more than just reconfirm that a link between stress and cognition exists; it actually offers a physiological answer as to why. In one particular study, researchers from UC Berkeley conducted tests on both low-come and
high-income children using an electroencephalograph (EEG), and results indicated that low-income children show differences in certain, specific brain functions. One researcher explains, “Those from low socioeconomic environments showed a lower response to the unexpected novel stimuli in the prefrontal cortex that was similar to the response of people who have had a portion of their frontal lobe destroyed by a stroke” (Sanders). Although those tested had no history of neurological damage, the researchers “suspect that stressful environments and cognitive impoverishment are to blame” (Sanders). While it is significantly more complex than as described in the layman’s terms above, if accepted as factual, it is groundbreaking to consider what this could mean in terms of further research and intervention for intelligent students who are struggling to succeed.

Similar to other research, these findings indicate that poverty is a major factor in the achievement gap, but it offers a new perspective of why that may be so. Certainly, stress is a contributing factor but there are others as well. Researchers in the UC Berkeley Study assert that by the age of four, children from low income homes may hear 30 million fewer words than middle-class children, and lack of verbal communication can be a contributing factor to this difference, a difference that “may manifest itself in problem solving and school performance” (Sanders). Eric Jensen, author of *Teaching With Poverty in Mind*, explains that one of the earliest causes of stress is failure to form healthy attachments (Ch. 1). The lack of attachment is so integral to child development that its absence can be a main reason why students fail to develop the ability to process stressful situations. On a positive note, a strong, healthy attachment to a caregiver makes a difference. Of children exposed to stress and trauma, those with an attentive caregiver often do not suffer the same detrimental results regardless of economic status.
Jensen makes the observation that in poverty problems seem to have a domino effect, with one leading to another, and another (Ch 2). It is applicable in this case, as the studies indicate the results of stress, trauma or neglect can be underdeveloped cognitive strategies that make it difficult to regulate thinking (Tough 91). These cognitive strategies, also called executive strategies, serve as an essential foundation for learning, since they relate to how information is processed by utilizing input, elaboration and output. In other words, it is the way in which one takes in and connects data, as detailed below.

Table 2.3

Cognitive skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Input</th>
<th>Elaboration</th>
<th>Output</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data quantity and quality</td>
<td>Identify problem</td>
<td>Communicate the process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematic data retrieval</td>
<td>Summarize/ use logical data</td>
<td>Visually transport data accurately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider 2 sources</td>
<td>Categorize by time</td>
<td>Use accurate data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify constancies across variations</td>
<td>Make a plan using data</td>
<td>Control impulses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use planning skills</td>
<td>Test hypothesis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visually transport data</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orient data in time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Clearly, without these strategies properly developed or fostered, learning would be difficult. Perhaps this gives insight as to why a disproportionate percentage of impoverished children are placed in special education programs or requires learning intervention (Payne 89). In Akron Public Schools for example, 18 percent of students have an Individualized Education Plan, which is designed for children who are classified as having a disability of some kind (Akron).
It should be noted that Payne’s work, which has been offered as professional development in public school districts across the country, has come under fire by critics. Asserting that Payne has made a significant amount of money at the expense of impoverished students, opponents argue that at a minimum, she benefits from society’s most vulnerable (Dworin and Bomer 105). Although her findings are based on the research of Reuven Feuerstein, who began work on modifying cognition to improve the learning process over 50 years ago (Steinberg), critiques of Payne claim she perpetuates a deficit perspective by appealing to commonly held beliefs or stereotypes that ultimately place poor students in the role of the other (Dworin and Bomer 108). Having concerns is justified, as studies on disadvantaged children can border on discrimination and, therefore, require careful consideration.

Such research findings are often far away from classroom reality, so it seemed that the voice of the teacher was needed. As J. Elspeth Stuckey points out, “Practicing teachers, however, have rarely been consulted about their profession” (37). For the purposes of this study in order to gain a local perspective, I interviewed two teachers, Cheryl Donald and Lois Allen. Donald is a third grade teacher at Taft Elementary School. She has been a teacher for eight years and spent the first four years teaching at an Akron Public School with a student population that is 85.7 percent economically disadvantaged (ODE). Lois Allan has taught at Alcott Elementary School for the past eight years and currently is teaching fourth grade. She completed her student teaching at Taft Elementary. Donald and Allen attended the same high school at the same time, and each received a Bachelor’s Degree in Elementary Education from the same university.

11 The names Cheryl Donald and Lois Allen are pseudonyms.
Donald has completed a master’s degree and Allen has 20 post baccalaureate hours towards a Master’s Degree in Education. In addition, both teachers consistently receive excellent evaluation scores, and as noted earlier, are considered highly qualified.

Payne and Tough’s work resonated with the both teachers and Donald commented, “the barrier I see is a short attention span, lack of focus, a lot movement – they [the students] are easily distracted. A failure to learn the daily routine…a month or so in to the school year.” Donald added that she has not consistently seen the same issues with attention span in the majority of the middleclass students whom she teachers.

Allen concurred. “Oh absolutely, well I think it is a lot of nature and nurture […] it can be something that is genetic or a birth problem because of drugs or alcohol abuse and certainly a low skill set when it comes to what…they have gained prior to coming to school.” She lamented the fact that even so, the curriculum does not allow for much altercation. However, she did see an increase in student performance this year and added, “I have a lot of parents who have more education and work jobs where they are at home at night. But they are also educated beyond the point that a lot of my other parents have been in previous years.”

Research on poverty does indicate a link between the education level of parents and the academic success of their children. It appears to be a cycle. Educated parents are more likely to have an acquired knowledge base that they will pass on to their children (Payne 88). However, this knowledge base that has been shown to make a difference is not elaborate. Simplistic as it may sound, more conversation or more exposure to books early on has been shown to contribute to the development of advanced cognitive skills, and a better opportunity for success in school (Sanders). Therefore, children who lack
that foundation are not doomed to underachieve academically, as the cycle can be altered. Studies show that with mediation specifically focused on the development of cognitive strategies even high-school aged individuals are able to make significant improvements. For children, dramatic play and games developed exclusively for that purpose have also proven to be successful (Sanders). The earlier the intervention the better, as one study found by reaching out to new mothers in impoverished neighborhoods. Nurses made home visits to teach healthy lifestyle skills and to encourage mothers to cuddle and read with children. By age six, those children involved in the study were one-third less likely to have behavior or learning difficulties (Kristof). Although these examples reported positive results, all took place outside of the school setting.

Both of the teachers interviewed agreed that implementing a supplemental curriculum that helped students build these strategies would be beneficial. This was based on the reasoning that when a teacher is trying to convey information, it is essential that the student have the necessary skills in place to process it and build on what they already know. Without those skills, effective learning cannot take place. It would be an interesting research project to see if such a program could be developed and successfully put into practice in a school with a high percentage of poverty. This type of intervention is available if parents can pay for it, as there is actually a tutoring center called Learning RX focusing exclusively on building cognitive skills (Learning RX). The program is designed to work on learning skills, not specific subject areas like traditional tutoring. It is based on the theory that learning barriers are not related to the level of difficulty of a specific book or writing assignment, but the lack of ability to process and connect
information effectively. The belief is that students who are able to develop these learning skills are then able to improve their academic performance.

Even though the research shows promise, it is not necessarily feasible to think that this type of skills training would ever be adapted as an intervention strategy for the students or schools that could possibly benefit from it. While federal education laws require early intervention for at-risk students, as well as high quality, research-based supplemental services for those not reaching certain proficiency levels, it always based on the premise that an equal education means that it is the same. Education reform tends to tiptoe around poverty in that it attempts to fix a learning divide with strategies that assume all students start school on equal footing, even though there are decades of evidence that prove otherwise. The result is reform that fails to directly address the affects of poverty on learning. Students, of course, continue to take proficiency tests, and the success of that is shown in the achievements gaps.
CHAPTER III
SAME SUBJECT, DIFFERENT RESULTS:
OHIO READING TESTS VS. NAEP READING TESTS

Every year, in Ohio, students in grades 3-8 take state reading tests that were initially required by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Sec. 1111). The same act also required students to participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) biennial reading tests in grades 4 and 8. Although there have been some changes to student proficiency requirements as a result of the latest education reform program, Race to the Top (RTTT), state and national tests are still required for states that chose to participate in the voluntary program, which all but a few have done. State tests are based on grade specific reading standards and initially measure the growth and proficiency of individual students. An average of the individual scores are then used for each grade to determine how well students are performing at the school, district and state level. The NAEP assessment was not created to evaluate individual progress, but rather to provide a snapshot of grade appropriate reading achievement across the state and the nation. A random sample of students are tested, and then, similar to that of the state test, scores are averaged to show proficiency by grade level. With both tests assessing the reading achievement of a state by grade, it could be assumed that the average rate of proficiency would be similar. However, that is not the case, as the tests have outcomes that vary widely, with the national test score reflecting significantly lower proficiency levels.
This variance could easily be overlooked since the results of NAEP are not as widely disseminated as state test results, and it does not affect school ratings. Yet, considering that closing racial and economic achievement gaps was one of the initial reasons for federal intervention in education, it seems important to give consideration to the different outcomes. After all, initially mandated by the federal government, testing has become the primary measure as to whether or not impoverished and minority students are performing at grade level. The two tests are federally required, and both track the achievement gap at the state level, so it is worth questioning why the results vary so, considering that accuracy should be the most important factor when determining if at-risk students are faring better or worse. Critics may heartily disagree with the premise, but regardless, as far as the federal government is concerned, testing shows if school reform initiatives are successful.

State reading tests, like the Ohio Achievement Assessment (OAA), are intended to assess student achievement level and show accountability for the required “challenging academic standards” (NCLB Sec.1111). In other words, the test should be reflective of academic content standards and benchmarks, which according to the Ohio Department of Education are, “Clearly defined statements and/or illustrations of what all students, teachers, schools and districts are expected to know and be able to do” (“Academic” 2). The national reading test initially was enacted based on congressional legislation, and it later became a requirement of NCLB that states receiving Title-I grant funding must participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress Authorization Act (NAEP). The Department of Education Statistics (DES), within the Department of Education, is responsible for the admission of the NAEP. According to the DES they
provide, “the nation's only ongoing assessment of what students know and can do in various subject areas” (“What”). In terms of the reading assessment, the NAEP uses informational and literacy texts to assess comprehension, with a focus on vocabulary and cognitive targets (“What”). Neither test is designed to reflect or mimic the other, yet both are research-based assessments that attempt to measure reading skill sets for specific grades. So, what happens when Ohio compares their OAA results to their NAEP test results?

**Test Discrepancies**

In terms of state testing, the literacy rate for grades 4 and 8 students in Ohio seems somewhat promising. The conclusion of the 2010-2011 reading OAA showed proficiency rates to be 72.2 percent for grade 4, and 73.9 percent for grade 8 statewide, which is close to meeting the state standard. While the results show there is room to improve, as a significant number of students are not testing proficient, at least there is an indication that the majority performed at grade level. By the OAA standards it can be inferred that approximately 72 percent of students are reading literate. Yet, there is also a national measure to consider, and here the divide begins.

According to the standards of the 2011 NAEP test, 27 percent of grade 4 students in Ohio are performing at or above the proficient level in reading, with 7 percent performing at an advanced level. Showing a small variance from the fourth grade, eighth grade students performed at a 37 percent proficiency rate, with only 4 percent performing at an advanced level (“Assessment”). The NAEP test shows a deficit of almost 40 percent in both grades when comparing results to the OAA reading assessment, as shown below.
Percentage of Ohio students scoring proficient or above

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GRADE 4</th>
<th>GRADE 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OAA</td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>73.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAEP</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>36.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The discrepancy shown above certainly brings to light questions about why tests that both measure reading skills have such different results. Again, the argument in favor of state testing is that it is a checks-and-balance system for current education law, showing if it is affective in narrowing achievement gaps. Regardless if that stance is valid or not, it is the measure in place. On that basis, it seems imperative that the state testing is as accurate as possible. With such a small percentage of Ohio students scoring proficient on the national reading test, it only makes sense to question if the literacy rate of students is lower than the state tests indicate. While federal legislators seem to agree with the opinion of E.D. Hirsh, Jr. that, “tests of academic progress are the only practical way to hold schools accountable for educating all the children…” (91), it would be beneficial if the required tests did not have such glaringly different results.

Views on Test Discrepancies

There are various schools of thought as to why the tests results show such a discrepancy. For example, Standard & Poor’s report on state and national testing determined that the two tests do not have the same purpose. Unlike the state test, the NAEP test is designed to give an overview of how students perform in regard to reading proficiency by testing a sample of students, whose averaged results are not used for
curriculum or instruction reform. Therefore, the NAEP is considered a “no-stakes” test (“National”), meaning that states do not face any consequences for poor performance, even though the tests are linked to Title I funding and clearly do not shed a favorable light on the reading literacy rates of Ohio students, as shown in Figure 1, (NCLB Sec. 1001). In Ohio, the necessary yearly progress for schools is not based on, or affected by, the NAEP test -- it strictly serves as a report card. The only condition attached to a school’s participation in the national testing is that Title I grant funding depends upon it.

Based on the fact NAEP testing is tied to important funding that schools receive, it is a logical conclusion that schools will participate in the process. However, the students selected for the test will not receive individual results, as they are not released, so there is little or no preparation for the test specifically, and little pressure on students or teachers to achieve high results (“National”). The National Center for Education Statistics maintains that the “assessment results present a broad view of how well America's students are reading,” which they consider to be “one of the most important skills that young people can acquire and develop throughout their lives” (“Assessment”). While the test does highlight how students are performing, with no official connection to state progress, the component of accountability is missing, which follows suit for a no-stakes test.

Conversely, if the NAEP assessment is a “no-stakes” test then the Ohio Achievement Assessments (OAA) are considered a “high-stakes” test, as the results can lead to rewards or sanctions for schools (“National”). Coupled with the fact that individual students and schools are evaluated, now as part of Race to the Top teacher evaluations are in part based on test results. Clearly, there is pressure for students and
teachers to prepare ("National"). A study conducted by Jaekyung Lee confirms that high-stakes state testing leads to an achievement gap between state and national testing (47). His hypothesis considers that high-stakes testing can lead to "the possible inflation of the number of students reaching the proficiency level" and goes on to theorize that "the state education agency itself is likely to water down its own performance standards" (Lee 51). His research shows that the more profound effect high stakes results will have on a state, the higher their test scores (Lee 51). Based on this study, it seems possible that some states are designing tests to be easier, which could highlight the national test as a more accurate portrayal of reading proficiency. Again, this raises questions about the validity of the tests.

Other critics argue that the high-stakes testing can result in teaching-to-the-test, meaning the learning is focused on concepts, strategies and subjects that will help students on achievement or proficiency tests specifically, perhaps at the cost of other learning. A recent teacher survey, reported on by Teachers Network, asked if teachers felt pressured to "teach to the test" in order to meet yearly performance goals. Out of 4513 who answered the question, 62 percent strongly agreed and 32 percent agreed ("Survey"). It only makes sense considering the possible repercussions that can come along with low test scores, such as sending notification letters to parents, less Title-I spending flexibility, and negatively affecting teacher evaluations. The affect on the teachers is significant since Race to the Top requires that student achievement on state test scores serve as considerable percentage of a teacher’s evaluation for the first time (Azuz). In *High Stakes Testing*, R. Murray Thomas suggests that teachers who are trying to avoid these possible
consequences focus more on high-stakes testing subject areas in the classroom (222). For obvious reasons districts may often support this practice.

On the one hand if schools teach to the test, highly reinforcing certain subjects, it is not entirely negative, as the subject matter in this case is reading. On the other hand, students may be missing out on pertinent educational experiences that may not be reinforced in the classroom, simply because it is not measured on an achievement test. Again, the teacher survey referenced above shows this concern to be an accurate one, as 85 percent agree or strongly agree that subjects covered by accountability testing are focused on at the expense of other learning. Alfie Kohn asserts, “The use of a high-stakes strategy only underscores the preoccupation with these tests and, as a result, accelerates a reliance on direct-instruction techniques and endless practice tests” (par.14). Kohn is correct in that Akron school students are currently taking any number of practice tests at school and encouraged to do so at home, as well. It is no wonder that other areas of the curriculum must be put aside due to the time constraints of a typical school day. On that note, all of the additional preparation could definitely be one reason why OAA state test shows higher proficiency rates than the NAEP test.

There is also the issue of performance standard indicators and their context to take into account. This is another issue that can add to the reading test achievement divide. Perhaps the framework in which Ohio defines reading proficiency differs from that of the NAEP. For example, scores that qualify as basic on the NAEP test may qualify as proficient on the OAA. This is not surprising considering performance indicators on the OAA and the NAEP are not necessarily categorized in accordance with the same set of guidelines. Also, taking into account the subjective nature of terms like proficiency, basic
or advanced, and how they can be defined in different contexts only adds to the debate. The National Center for Education Statistics addresses this specifically by acknowledging that variances may exist, however; claiming that since all states still have different tests and proficiency guidelines, it is too large an undertaking to compare and contrast those guidelines with their own (“What”). Once the participating Race to the Top states all have the same test format and skill-level assessment, it will be interesting to see if a true comparison can be made to the NAEP.

Researcher James Pellegrino initially questions if states should align test performance levels with those of the national NAEP test. He cautions against this, however; citing concerns about NAEP performance indicators found in independent evaluations by both the National Academy of Education and the National Academy of Sciences (9). The evaluations addressed the debate about NAEP achievement levels of Basic, Proficient and Advanced and whether or not they are valid. “Among the concerns expressed by various experts was the lack of evidence, either from within the test or from external sources, to support the proposed interpretations of…performance levels” which is further evidence that the variance in performance standards could also add to discrepancies in the reading test results (Pellegrino 10). Although Pellegrino adds that the same evaluations found the NAEP had reason enough to call itself “the gold standard’ of educational assessments” (par. 11). It makes sense that the performance divide shown between the two tests is, at least in part, due to inconsistencies in achievement level assignment. Since there is no clear, definitive answer or solution, questions remain as to which test is a more accurate indicator of student knowledge.
Legislation requires states to measure accountability that is in line with curriculum standards, so it makes sense that the format or topics would seem more familiar to students. Perhaps they are able to relate more readily to the questions. Since the NAEP reading assessment does not reflect individual state content standards and therefore, may be less familiar to students. However, the NAEP contends that all materials on the reading test are grade appropriate and are similar to everyday reading selections students would encounter (“Reading” 16). This issue will be addressed further in the next section of this paper in a comparison of test standards and their effect on the respective test results.

Education critic E.D. Hirsh, Jr. believes the current trend of testing for reading comprehension is flawed because it does not take into account students’ general knowledge. In his opinion, reading comprehension could be effectively assessed if the tests reflected general knowledge taught in school (106). The NAEP claims that “to make reader/test connections, the reader must link information in the text with knowledge and experience,” and employ real world application on the reading test (“Reading” 8). It seems that this expectation would fall under the general knowledge category that Hirsh Jr. discusses. His argument could also apply to the Ohio Achievement Assessment (OAA) because, on some level, information learned by students as a product of teaching to the test and the aligning of familiar content standards with accountability assessments, seems to translate into the general knowledge category as well. Of course there can always be debate about whether either test truly represents general knowledge in their reading assessments. Although there may be several explanations for why the
discrepancies exist, the consideration of general knowledge adds another piece to the puzzle.

Test Comparisons

When considering the reason for discrepancies found between the OAA and the NAEP reading tests, it also is important to take into account what each intends to measure, as well as the actual makeup of test questions. Although both tests assess reading achievement, again, there are no consistent or universal guidelines across the board to accomplish this. Therefore, just like the achievement levels, the makeup of the tests varies. Based on the differences shown in achievement results of the two tests, a debate could be made about the perceived difficulty level of the tests, with the assumption that the NAEP questions are harder. It would be an easy conclusion to draw and a logical explanation for the differences, but based on the claim by the National Center for Education Statistics that comparing achievement levels would be too difficult an undertaking, it remains tough to prove at this point. Both tests are designed with grade appropriate reading materials, so it hard to make a case for which test, if either, accurately reflects grade 4 or grade 8 achievement.

The tests differ from each other in several ways that are likely to manifest as variances in the results. However, the most profound difference between the OAA and the NAEP reading assessments is the makeup of the questions and the way in which they appear on the tests. According to the “2005 Framework for National Assessment of Educational Progress”, at least 50 percent of the reading test questions for fourth and eighth grade tests require a constructed response to a reading passage, while the rest of the questions are multiple choice. The two types of constructed response questions are;
short answer, requiring one or two sentences; or extended response, requiring a paragraph to a full-page answer (“Reading” 25). In contrast, the “Ohio Grade 4 Reading Achievement Blueprint” showed that the standard is to have 19 percent of the test comprised of short answer and extended response questions for reading selections, with the rest consisting of multiple-choice (1). The “Ohio Grade 8 Reading Achievement Blueprint” showed similar results with short answer and extended response questions totaling 16 percent of that test (1). That is a considerable difference in the amount of writing that students are expected to complete, and writing proficiency could be a factor.

The tests also assess different aspects of reading literacy. For example, the NAEP assessment does not report on whether or not students can summarize a plot or find specific details in a story, which are skills the NAEP attributes with individual achievement, although it is not clear why (“Reading” 11). However, examples of questions asking for plot summarization or specific details can be found on the 2005 Reading OAA for Grade 4 and Grade 8. This is illustrated by the question below, which followed an informative reading passage on the Grade 8 assessment: “As president, how does Lincoln show his appreciation to the farmer and his wife?” (4). This multiple-choice question is clearly asking students to find specific detail. There are other examples of similar questions on the remainder of the test, as well as on the Grade 4 test. In addition, there are also examples in reference to plot and themes such as the following Grade 4 multiple-choice question that asks: “Which sentence best summarizes the poem?” (17). This is pertinent because it shows that the OAA test may incorporate types of questions to assess reading literacy achievement that, according to NAEP, have been purposely left out of their achievement report. Students’ level of familiarity with the type of questions
asked may be an important factor to consider. Furthermore, as discussed earlier in this paper, since the OAA is inline with, and serves as an accountability measure for the state content standards, students may be able to use that familiarity to answer such questions more readily.

According to the Grade 4 and Grade 8 Ohio Reading Achievement Blueprint, the OAA employs students’ proficiency on defined standards to determine their achievement level. Both the fourth and eighth grade tests adhere to the following standards:

2. Reading Application: Informational, technical and persuasive text
3. Reading Application: Literary text
4. Acquisition of vocabulary

(2)

In fact, at the time, those same four items used to identify testing standards make up a portion of “Ohio’s Academic Content Standards in English Language Arts” that is composed of 10 standards in total (“Academic”). The skill of reading for detail or to relay plot summarization may be reported on as part of the Reading Application standards for both the test and for the English Language Arts curriculum. Based on that information, without a doubt, the OAA coincides with the Ohio curriculum more closely than the NAEP test is designed to do.

While they are not necessarily tied to any state curriculum, the NAEP has their own testing criterion. The 2005 testing framework details their goals for reading literacy and their assessment guidelines, which consists of three reading contexts and four aspects that illustrate students’ response to text:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Three Reading Contexts</th>
<th>Four Aspects of Reading and Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

44
1. Reading for literary experience  
2. Reading for information  
3. Reading to perform as task  

1. Forming a general understanding  
2. Developing interpretation  
3. Think beyond the text  
4. Consider why and how the text was developed  

(“Reading” 8-9)

At first glance, the guidelines appear to be more complex and detailed than the OAA standards. However, looking at the fourth and eighth grade 2005 NAEP Demonstration Booklets that offer sample reading test questions, there are some fourth grade level questions that appear to ask students to find specific details in the story, such as:

“Where do Wombats usually live?” Or “To get food, the Wombat uses?” (12, 14)

Is it possible these questions are classified on the NAEP as “Reading for Information” instead of, reading to find specific detail? However, I did not find similar questions in the eighth grade sample question booklet, or specific plot summarization questions in any of the NAEP test demonstration booklets. That is not to say the actual test does not have questions that could qualify as such, just that my research was limited to the information made available by the Department of Education Statistics.

In spite of some similarities in NAEP and OAA questions, it does not appear to be a case of semantics from my perspective. In an attempt to further compare NAEP test questions to OAA state test questions, strictly on the basis of my individual opinion, the NAEP questions overall did seem more difficult. Between the sample demonstration booklets and the past question bank available on their website, the multiple-choice and the constructed response questions often seemed to require complex strategies to answer. Overall, after comparing the questions to the OAA sample tests, my perception is that the NAEP questions are more demanding for students, which is highlighted by the lowered
test scores. Of course, like many issues that relate to students’ reading literacy, perceived level of test difficulty is also subjective.

**Achievement Gaps**

Unfortunately, when it comes to OAA and NAEP testing, consistency can be found in the achievement gaps. The reading tests may show profound discrepancies in overall reading achievement results, but the ongoing trend evident on both tests is that white, middle-class students outperform their peers. This happens in spite of education law that is designed to help students succeed by “closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers” (NCLB Sec.1001). To date, there has not been significant change in the achievement gap regardless of assessments or changes in federal guidelines.

On a short-term basis, the percentage of proficient students tends to change within a 10 point range from year-to-year, but there has been no consistent or long-term change in the achievement gaps – no significant widening or narrowing - as reflected in the OAA grade 4 reading results shown below. Looking at a comparison based on ethnicity or economic status, the scores seem to fluctuate together. Almost all categories of grade 4 Ohio students showed an increase in proficiency between the 2003-2004 and the 2004-2005 school years. In this case, the economic achievement gap did not get significantly smaller; it just shifted. For example, an 8-point increase can be seen during that time period for disadvantaged students, which is positive, but the non-disadvantaged students showed a 6-point increase. The results still leave an achievement gap of over 20 points.
As shown in Figure 3.2, most other changes were negligible, as White and non-disadvantaged students continue to outperform their peers by a notable amount.

Table 3.2

Annual reports of reading progress, Ohio grade 4 students scoring proficient or above

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>60.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>76.7</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>79.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>62.6</td>
<td>71.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantaged</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>66.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondisadvantaged</td>
<td>80.5</td>
<td>85.5</td>
<td>88.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3

The Nation’s Report Card (NAEP) assessment results, Ohio grade 4 students scoring proficient or above

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantaged</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondisadvantaged</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Unlike the state assessments, the NAEP test is not used as a barometer to determine the success of education reform. On that note, the results from comparing the 2003 – 2011 grade 4 assessments reflect similar variances in student proficiency percentages to that of the OAA. Between 2005-2011, there was a 5-point gain in proficiency for African-American students, but for White students as well. During that same time period disadvantaged students had a 4-point increase in proficiency rates, but so did the non-disadvantaged students. Following suit with the state test, the NAEP results do not show any significant, lasting change in the achievement gap either over the 8-year span shown. The results of both tests indicate there still is plenty of room for improvement.
In effect, the one thing the NAEP and OAA reading tests show commonality on is the achievement gap. This only further complicates questions about the testing. Essentially, comparing the two tests makes it difficult to ascertain whether or not the majority of Ohio students have proficient reading skills. Even more troubling, and not surprising, is the reality that, by both accounts, the economic and racial achievement gaps are still considerable. In that respect, the end product is a deficit for disadvantaged and minority students.

**Effect on Students**

One of the most serious issues relating to the OAA and NAEP test result variances is the question of students’ reading literacy. Are most students able to perform reading tasks at grade level or not? The state test results show, from their perspective, that yes, the majority of students are grade-level reading-literate. The national tests show, from their perspective, that no, the majority of students are not grade-level reading-literate. Clearly, in these two instances, the definition of reading literacy is not the same. Ross W. Winterowd argues that defining literacy is a political act in which the definition reflects the priorities of those who create it (5). If that is the true, then what does it say that the dire results of the reading test developed by a division of the Department of Education and enacted by Congress to determine “what students know and can do” does not lead to further investigation? (“What”). What does it say when doing well on state tests has become so important that an overwhelming majority of teachers surveyed claimed that it has actually hindered their instruction? (“Survey”). Furthermore, what does it say that the same legislation that requires these two tests and mandates reform to close the achievement gaps, has failed to succeed?
There are no easy answers, and unfortunately it seems that the minority and impoverished students continue to fare the worst. After all, reading is the cornerstone of education. It is well known that students with poor literacy skills tend to have lower achievement in all subjects, and are more likely to drop out of school. So, it would follow that it is important to know if 72 percent of students Ohio are proficient in reading as the OAA results show, or only 34 percent as the NAEP results show. It does not seem fair to assume the state test is accurate and dismiss what the national test indicates, considering what is at stake.

**Conclusion**

Federal guidelines are supposed to enhance student performance and help close achievement gaps. Testing is supposed to serve as the checks and balance system for those guidelines. Unfortunately, there is not congruency between the two tests that assess achievement, leading to debate about the accuracy of the testing. In “The Consequences of Literacy,” Winterowd asserts “reading and writing have profound consequences for the individual and for society” (3). In effect, literacy comes at a price. Perhaps for students in Ohio schools that price may come as a result of testing not necessarily being an accurate portrayal of their reading literacy. If students are being classified as having a higher rate of proficiency than they do, chances are they will not have the adequate instruction to make up for the deficit. If they are being shortchanged so to speak, there could be long-term consequences as a result.

The reality is that the necessity of reading proficiency does not end with school. Winterowd links literacy with the ability to function in the world, noting that, “technology also demands literacy” (Winterowd 11). In that context, it is virtually
impossible to find a job that does not require literacy skills, specifically reading. The Department of Education Statistics expresses the similar view that, “in a world driven by technology, the complexity of reading literacy is increasing as the format of texts becomes more diverse” (“Reading” 2-3). This is applicable for the Ohio job market as well. For example, in a state with more manufacturing jobs than most, there are marketing campaigns to attract polymer and biomedical research companies to the area (“Positive”). A higher value is placed on jobs that are desk-centered or technology-based, as industrial jobs in this country are in short supply - a fact which makes it essential for students to have accurate accounts of their literacy achievement while intervention is still an option.

According to Deborah Brandt, “Where in the past, social and economic stratification determined one’s chances of sharing or not sharing in a common literacy, today literacy itself is more complexly stratified and contributes to widening gaps in social and economic status” (29). Increased literacy is directly related to an increased opportunity for social advancement and earning potential (Brandt 2). Without higher reading skills, without being functionally literate, it is more difficult to earn a living and become an active member of society (Winterowd 15). With that in mind, it is hard to dismiss variances in test results and the possibility that Ohio students’ reading literacy rates are not being effectively measured. Having a solid foundation in literacy does not guarantee success, but without it, the field definitely narrows. Winterowd is right; there are consequences to literacy. Unfortunately, the students who most need the help, who continue to perform poorly on reading tests, are the students most deserving of accurate, consistent results.
For now at least, variances in assessment results will continue to leave question about the accuracy of the tests and results, since it is not clear if either test is fair portrayal of student literacy. There may be several reasons and justifiable causes that can explain precisely why there is a high-stakes reading test that shows significantly higher proficiency rates than the no-stakes reading test. Both are required. One counts, one does not. All of this is an indication that something needs to change, because it should not be left to chance that the OAA state test is the accurate one.
CHAPTER IV

EDUCATION REFORM: THE MORE THINGS CHANGE,
THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME

In 2010 the teachers at an economically disadvantaged Akron public school arrived on the first day to see a banner hanging by the entrance to let parents know that once again Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) had not been met and that students were eligible to transfer to a charter school free of charge, with Akron Public Schools providing the transportation. This was in addition to a letter that had already been sent to guardians of students, which alerted them of school choice options. Based on federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) laws, schools that did not meet proficiency goals for two consecutive years on state tests were required to notify families and offer an alternative school option to students. With a significant number of parents accepting the offer, the school saw a decline in enrollment, which in turn led to teacher layoffs.

Federal involvement in education has become inextricably linked to accountability in the form of testing, in spite of inconsistencies in the system. To date, the required testing has not shown any notable improvements as a result of the accountability component added to federal education law. Unfortunately, instead of showing a successful progression towards higher rates of proficiency, results of No Child Left Behind testing highlighted just how many schools failed to meet the Adequate Yearly
Progress (AYP) standard - nearly half in 2011-2012 - with some states faring much worse, reporting as few as 20 percent of schools meeting AYP (“Obama”). For many schools, instead of gaining some autonomy with how Title I grant funding was to be spent as a reward for meeting NCLB guidelines, most were more familiar with low ratings and the scenario described above (U.S.). Sanctions associated with the education law may have seemed motivating on paper, but the reality was rather harsh, and by 2011 many schools were facing the consequences of their students’ test scores. That fall, with the NCLB requirement looming that all schools reach 100 percent reading and math proficiency by 2014, and the failure of Congress to overhaul NCLB, President Barack Obama announced the ESEA Flexibility waiver program, which was essentially billed as a NCLB relief plan (“No Child”). State education agencies that agreed to meet specific guidelines set forth by the Department of Education could apply for waivers from some NCLB provisions.

**ESEA Flexibility / Race to the Top**

The waiver offered freedom from some of the most critiqued provisions of NCLB, such as, having to offer school choice and after-school tutoring, as well as the rating system (“No Child”). This chapter focuses on the latest federal reform initiatives and examines how these programs seek to narrow achievement gaps by ultimately expanding federal control over education and enacting sanctions similar to that of past legislation. At first glance, the reform appeared to offer something different by touting more autonomy for states. For example, as one part of the flexibility request, states seemingly had an opportunity to determine their own course of action on issues ranging from teacher and principal evaluations to interventions for poorly performing schools.
(“No Child”). However, upon closer inspection, the Department of Education required all state plans to meet specific guidelines that were subject to approval. Therefore, in terms of independence, the requirements that accompanied the waiver were not significantly different in concept or application than that of NCLB.

With the Department of Education (DOE) promoting ESEA Flexibility and more autonomy, many State education agencies (SEA) were interested in applying for the waiver. That process, however, was no small undertaking. More specifically, states submitted extensive paperwork to verify the Department of Education requirements were completed or in process. In some states, like Ohio, meeting those requirements involved legislation. Just one example involves the annual school report card; the snapshot of how well a school performs on accountability testing overall. Since the flexibility waiver allows states to abandon the system NCLB used to rate school effectiveness, it also requires a new plan to be in place. Ohio House Bill 555 that recently passed the state Senate seeks to change the current rating labels to an A-F grading system (Bloom). It is unclear at this point how the letter assignment will compare to ratings under NCLB. If not comparable on some level, critics will likely say the system has been changed to falsely show improvement or success.

Waiver applications also had to effectively address three main components in order to be granted approval. First, states had to show that standards and assessments designed to prepare students for college and/or careers had been implemented. Second, systems for evaluation, support and accountability had to be in place to reward the highest performing low-income schools, and schools that show the most progress. Alternately, plans with “rigorous” intervention strategies for the lowest performing schools within a state,
referred to as Priority or Focus schools, were required and would be applied to the lowest scoring 10 percent. Third, each state was to develop a system to evaluate and support the performance of teachers and principals based on “valid measures, including student progress over time” with the intent to help improve instruction (Duncan). It seemed that states were not only going to have more freedom to make decisions independently than under NCLB, but also be afforded more local opportunity to help the lowest performing schools, although that was not entirely accurate, as time would tell.

ESEA Flexibility is just one part of what is currently a two-part education reform plan, with the other component being Race to the Top (RTT). RTT was part of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARAA) and offers an interesting twist on education reform. States are given an option to participate in a competition to receive a portion of 4 billion dollars in grant money. The Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan describes it as follows:

Race to the Top supports states that raise standards, build better data systems, evaluate and support principals and teachers, and dramatically transform their lowest-performing schools. It also supports the development of new and better assessments aligned with high standards…to show us how they can personalize and individualize education for a set of students in their schools. (Brenchly)

Additionally, states had to “develop a rigorous and comprehensive plan…designed to improve educational outcomes for all students, close achievement gaps…and improve the quality of instruction” (Duncan). That language sets the bar amazingly high as states are suddenly expected to solve pervasive problems like closing the achievement gaps. The preliminary details of the plan sound rather vague, and again not much different than past federal education initiatives.
Flexibility and transparency are words frequently used by Duncan when discussing federal education initiatives (“Race”). In reality, does the Race to the Top competition or the NCLB waiver program truly offer states more flexibility than NCLB did? And, if so, is that the component that is finally going to make a difference when it comes to student achievement? Ultimately, fostering student achievement is the goal that drives education reform, and the appearance is that states have the control and resources in their hands, although that is not exactly accurate. Allowing state education agencies to develop their own report card standards, system for evaluations, or school interventions appears to lessen the role of the government in public education, but all of those components are required and subject to federal approval just as they were under NCLB. Furthermore, it was widely publicized that applications for the new federal programs were evaluated and determined by peer reviewers and not the Department of Education, promoting the image of transparency and limited federal involvement. However, all peer reviewers were selected and extensively trained by the Department of Education (DOE) (“Call”). It is not as if the DOE tried to hide the fact that peer reviewers were paid and working on their behalf, but in terms of transparency, it was not widely shared either.

Additionally, although RTT is innovative from the perspective that states compete for funding, the current reform initiatives are revisiting a concept from past ESEA reauthorizations – funding in exchange for compliance. It was central to Bill Clinton’s Goals 2000: Educate America Act, in which participation was voluntary and only states interested in receiving federal funding, including Title I money, had to adopt the provisions that were set forth by the legislation (McCluskey 62). Similarly, if states currently want to compete for funding or seek relief from NCLB, it is also with an
agreement to meet educational requirements approved by Congress and set forth by the DOE. For example, it may be accurate that the RTT participation is optional, but the majority of states chose to compete and it makes sense to question if most had the financial or human resources to opt out. On that note, it seems that the term flexibility is a relative term when it comes to setting education policy.

While the combination of federal education reform language and financial investment indicate that helping the poorest students is a priority, Cornel West would disagree. In fact, as one who has dedicated a significant amount of time and research to the impoverished in this country, West thinks the federal investment is meager one, and said as much to Arne Duncan: “I know you all are break dancing over this $4 billion initiative\(^{12}\), but Afghanistan gets $4 billion every day. That’s…how warped our priorities are!” (Smiley and West 171). West’s comparison certainly puts things in perspective, as does the fact that 2 billion federal dollars were allocated from 1965-1966, the first year ESEA was enacted by Lyndon B. Johnson (McCluskey 42). Regardless, states still made significant changes to compete for the dollars in question as well as the flexibility offered.

**Common Core Standards**

Further promoting the idea of flexibility for states was the choice each was given on whether or not to adopt the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI). The initiative “is a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers...” with the intent to develop “standards in collaboration with teachers, school administrators, and experts, to

\(^{12}\) Cornel West is referencing the 4 billion dollar Race to the Top funding. Additionally money is available for schools participating in Race to the Top district competition.
provide a clear and consistent framework to prepare our children for *college and the workforce* (emphasis mine)” (Common). The language used by CCSSI to describe the common core is similar to the requirements spelled out by the ESEA Flexibility waiver. As noted above, states submitting ESEA flexibility requests also were required to implement standards that promoted *college and career readiness*. Forty-five states have agreed to utilize the more rigorous math and reading Common Core standards with full implementation slated for the 2014-2015 school year (Common). States that chose not to adopt it have the painstaking task of developing their own career and college ready standards and, like NCLB, those standards will be subject to federal approval. So, although the Common Core is not a provision of the new education initiatives per se, states certainly felt pressure to commit to it. That being said, implementing new standards is no easy task for state or local education agencies.

In fact, implementation of the common core can take a state two to three years. In part, it takes time for the standards to take affect in local districts because of significant differences in the way curriculum is to be taught. For example, what traditionally has been the job of the language arts teacher is a responsibility shared by teachers in every subject under CCSSI, as “the standards call for teachers of science, social studies, and other subjects to teach literacy skills unique to their disciplines” (Gewetz). Teachers are also to utilize more informational texts in their lessons, again, across the curriculum, and the standards focus on promoting critical thinking (Weider). Additionally, the common standards require specific writing instruction, and evidence that it is linked to student reading (Gewetz). This is just a small snapshot of what participating states committed to, but it is clear that more is being asked of the teachers and the students as well.
By many accounts, and by design, the Common Core is more rigorous than most individual state standards were in the past (Weider). On one hand, adopting national standards certainly makes sense for academic consistency and, in my opinion, serves as a solution to the extensive variances previously found state to state. On the other hand, implementing more difficult standards, when a significant percentage of students struggle with presumably less painstaking ones, may be setting students up to fail. That is not to say that uniformity of standards were not needed, just that it is not clear how students are expected to succeed. On that note, in order to meet the requirements of the common standards, the way educators teach will have to change as well, which is yet another factor that may or may make a difference in student achievement over time.

Change is rarely easy, but professional development and common core training have been provided in states that can afford it. Unfortunately, not all can. Kentucky is one such state that was not able to pay for the training, yet was also the first to administer proficiency testing based on the Common Core, something all participating states won’t be required to do until 2014. The testing in Kentucky resulted in both good and bad news. The bad news is that student proficiency rates dropped by a third across the board compared to testing in accordance with NCLB. The good news is that that decline is smaller than had been expected (Weider). According to Chris Minnich, executive director at the Council of Chief State School Officers\(^\text{13}\), in 2014 all common core states are expected to experience results similar to those in Kentucky when tests change to the Common Core format (Weider). The reasoning is that it will take time for students to

\(^{13}\) The organization, Council of Chief State School Officers jointly developed the Common Core State Standards Initiative with the National Governor’s Association.
adjust to an assessment based on the new, more arduous college and career ready standards.

**Teacher Evaluations**

Teachers have expressed concern about lower test scores as well and fully expect to see a significant decline when the Common Core testing begins. While it is not unusual for a new program to have a learning curve, for teachers the apprehension goes beyond just worrying that students aren’t succeeding. As referenced earlier, participating states must comply with Race to the Top (RTT) and ESEA Flexibility mandates. One such mandate that is central to both of the federal programs is that participating states use student growth (achieved on accountability testing) as a *significant* part of teacher performance evaluations (“Race”, “ESEA”). So for the first time ever in Ohio and many other states, teacher evaluations will be based in part on how well students perform (“Grading”). While this directive was set by federal reform initiatives, individual states proposed their own teacher evaluation plans as part of the ESEA Flexibility and RTT application process, which were subject to approval. In turn, states passed laws to put this change in force in order to receive waivers and/ or RTT funding. In Ohio for example, 50 percent of a teacher’s evaluation will be established by student academic growth in math or reading on standardized tests, according to Ohio Revised Code Section 3319.112 (Standards). Teachers will now face the same scrutiny that schools, districts and states have with past education reform. For teachers who had initially welcomed a change from NCLB, it seems that the sanctions for Race to the Top (RTT) specifically fall on them. The couple of years that it may take for students to adjust to a new test format, which is
an estimate, could make a significant difference in how a teacher is rated, and it is not without consequences.

In fact, it already has made a difference for some Akron teachers who are subject to the new evaluation system. One such teacher was the only educator in her building to have all her students (thirty-two) test as proficient in math and reading on the 2010-2011 OAA test, however, she is still considered an ineffective teacher according to the evaluation process. It is confusing, but even though her students tested as proficient in math, based on a value-added component that Ohio has adopted, the results indicated that, on average, students failed to show one year’s growth. Proficiency is considered to be an achievement measure at one point in time while value-added is meant to measure growth from year-to-year (Batelle). Therefore, teachers can have proficient students and yet technically still be classified as ineffective if the same students fail to display a minimum of one-year’s growth on proficiency tests. In cases like this, Title I schools notify parents of their right to request information about a teacher’s status, and teachers are offered professional development options (Student). However, teachers who rate as ineffective on 2 out of 3 evaluations are to be tested on subject content knowledge and possibly face job loss (Student). Whereas in the past schools were rated on student test results, now it will be the teachers.

Problems with the ESEA flexibility/ Race to the Top teacher evaluation mandate are surfacing in many states, and teacher, principals and critics are speaking out. In New York, two school principals have written a letter of petition stating their strong concern for the new evaluation requirement by highlighting how detrimental it can be for teachers and students alike. They offer compelling research that negates the validity of the value-
added component, and point out the sad fact that the lowest performing students may bear the worst of it with teachers vying to have the highest achievers in their classrooms ("New Teacher Evaluations"). So far, 1,500 principals and over 5,000 others have signed in support. Still, another New York principal sent a survey to all principals in the state seeking opinions about the evaluation system. With over 500 respondents, the results showed that of those who had a teacher receive the ineffective label, 73 percent of the principals felt it was undeserved, and the majority surveyed believed that student test results are not an accurate evaluation tool for teacher skill level ("New Teacher Evaluations"). The sanctions for NCLB were generally based on school ratings, but the consequences for student’s not showing adequate academic growth in accordance seems personal. It is one thing to categorize a school as needing improvement, but calling a teacher ineffective based on limited data seems counterproductive. That is not to say that all teachers are first-rate, just that the test scores do not always show the whole picture.

While Race to the Top seeks to close achievement gaps and help the poorest schools it is using the same accountability premise that was prevalent and not successful for NCLB. With jobs on the line, perhaps new the evaluation system is attempt to weed out those who shouldn’t be teaching, but it also sends the same message that teachers will perform better if the consequences are undesirable enough. What the new reform measures fail to address though are some of the barriers that teachers face in the classroom daily. For example, of the students attending the school discussed in the beginning of this chapter, almost half have an Individual Education Plan (IEP), which means the child is classified as having a disability of some kind (Akron). That is staggering to imagine, especially when taking into account class size, as in one classroom
alone 9 out of 30 students had an IEP. Yet, when it comes to testing, the only exception Ohio makes is for students who miss more than 60 days of school (State). With the new evaluation measures in place, the reality is that teachers are left with little incentive to work with struggling students or to teach in the toughest schools.

**Poverty**

If all things were equal and there was not a history of significant racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps in this country, basing teacher performance evaluations on the test results of their students would make sense. Yet, once again, current reform seeks to help the lowest performing students and schools but does not seem to account for differences. The reality is that one-size-fits-all education solutions have not worked for impoverished or minority students because influences outside the school cannot always be remedied within the school. David C. Berliner would agree. His study, at the University of Arizona’s Education Policy Research Center, determined that student achievement is most affected and determined by out of school factors, and notes that expecting teachers to overcome issues over which they have no control is not realistic (40). Berliner explains that impoverished children are more likely than middle class students to face one or more of six out-of-school factors that contribute to lower achievement, such as:

1. Low birth-weight and non-genetic prenatal influences on children
2. Inadequate medical, dental, and vision care, often a result of inadequate or no medical insurance
3. Food insecurity
4. Environmental pollutants
5. Family relations and family stress
6. Neighborhood characteristics

It seems to come full circle back to poverty. Although it has missed the mark, so much of education reform has been developed to help impoverished children succeed, and yet the harsh reality is that poverty is a formidable opponent.
Teachers in impoverished schools see the accuracy of Berliner’s research daily, and as Laura Ofobike, chief editorial writer for the Akron Beacon Journal stresses, the effects of living in poverty can truly damage a child’s well being beyond anything new standards can remedy (A6). Not surprisingly, this can be seen in the new A-F school grading system that Ohio is seeking adopt,\textsuperscript{14} in which the schools that would receive As (66 schools) had a poverty rate of 13.2 percent, and the schools that would receive Fs (227 of them) had a poverty rate of 90.6 (Ofobike). The numbers are not a surprise, and Ofobike points out that a child’s socioeconomic status does not have to be the determining factor between success and failure in school, but generally it is. Regardless of outside influences or individual student problems, the current education mandates hold teachers responsible for making sure their students show adequate progress on accountability testing - or face the consequences.

\textbf{Moving Forward}

For all the change that comes with new education reform, much of it is the same on many levels – accountability testing, expanded federal control, and the hope that teachers are skilled enough to overcome the effects of poverty. Joshua Starr, Superintendent of a Maryland school district said, “It is another example to me of how we’re not focused on the right things in the American education conversation today…it’s just sort of moving around the chairs on the Titanic” (Motoko). He makes a strong point that federal legislation has been so off target that attempts have done little more than change the scenery a bit without offering of a viable solution. The achievement gaps are

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{14} Under the initial version of Ohio House Bill 555, many schools would have received a grade lower than the comparable NCLB rating. ODE sought to amend the legislation to change the way the grading system would be applied.
evidence of that. On one hand there are positives to the latest reform, and some of the changes required by the common core standards do seem promising. On the other hand, what looks good on paper or in theory does not always translate as such in real life, as was the case with NCLB. It is unfortunate but again, as with past reform initiatives, time will be the best indicator of whether or not a positive impact is made for the students who need it the most – those who are statistics in the achievement gaps.

Consequences, accountability testing and ESEA reauthorizations have not yet proven to be successful in raising student success rates for poor and minority students. Even so, since the 1960s, it seems that as the public’s faith in the education system lessens, federal intervention grows or become more acceptable. While there are states choosing not to participate in the most current federal programs, few as they may be, federal control over education appears to be far-reaching, despite the claims of state and district autonomy. School districts may in fact decide on their own curriculum materials but most states also chose to present them in accordance with the career-and-college-ready common standards. Having consistency across the country is favored, and locally some districts are expecting schools to literally be on the same page. Most districts are offering pacing guides to teachers so all can present the same lesson on the same day, complete with the corresponding standard. In Akron, teachers are cautioned to always know what standard they are covering with each specific lesson. There is even a pacing team that makes “rounds” by arriving in classrooms to verify if a teacher is following the pacing guide and able to name the appropriate standard. It has somewhat of a Big Brother feel to it, but also shows just how invested schools districts are in trying to make the Common Core work.
While Race to the Top may not be as different from past education legislation as some might have hoped, there are signs of success and encouraging aspects to the new reform. For example, a Chicago school with a high poverty rate and traditionally low achievement has seen test scores rise 16 points since starting to utilize the common core standards (“Chicago”). Though the state has not administered the common core assessment test yet, and expects to see lowered test score when they do, a sign of success is still a welcomed one. Perhaps the Common Core concept of delving more in-depth into fewer subjects (“Chicago”) will be the tipping point for some of the lowest performing schools.

In addition, the fact that the Common Core promotes writing across the curriculum is also a bright spot. Although the concept is not a new one for those in the field of composition studies, it is new to public education reform. This makes sense, considering the usage of writing in different forms or as a learning tool is more common in the college setting. As Janet Emig touted thirty-five years ago, “If the most efficacious learning occurs when learning is re-inforced, then writing through its inherent re-inforcing cycle involving hand, eye, and brain makes a uniquely powerful, multi-representational tool for learning” (124-25). That writing is recognized as an important aspect of learning is especially reassuring considering the latest buzzword in education is STEM, an acronym for science, technology, engineering and math, which represents the trend of promoting innovation and preparing students for future, globally competitive careers.

Requiring more writing, more rigorous standards, and in-depth study into subjects is no small undertaking for veteran educators to make, especially when they ultimately
have their jobs on the line. So, it seems fair to ask - are teachers adequately prepared for what is now required of them? Missouri is leading the way in revamping teacher training and seemingly taking a page from public education reform, as teacher education programs at the college level will be subject to an annual letter grade rating. Also, highlighting just how pervasive accountability testing is, Missouri is moving towards a statewide system to determine which colleges educate the teachers whose students perform the best on proficiency tests (Bock). Similar steps are likely to be taken by other states, as “the American Federation of Teachers proposed that all prospective teachers in the country take a rigorous bar exam to gauge how well they master a subject and demonstrate the ability to teach it” (Bock). Perhaps there is some irony to be found in the fact that potential teachers will also have to face rigorous standards and proficiency testing, but it stresses just how determined states are to show adequate growth on accountability testing. If nothing else, states are feeling pressure.

Since the Common Core, and the mandates of ESEA Flexibility and Race to the Top are not fully in place yet, there are still more questions than answers at this point. While the teacher evaluation process is already a bone of contention nationally, it remains to be seen what other issues will evoke wide reaching criticism. Additionally, with intervention plans for the lowest performing schools that focus more on teacher performance than the effects of poverty, one can only hope for a positive outcome. A positive outcome by federal reform criterion, of course, would mean that the achievement gaps have narrowed as evidenced by the results of the new common standards testing.
At the end of the day, testing is one thing but truly improving student success rates is what counts. Unfortunately, that has proven to be no easy task. In the meantime, students are essentially part of a wait-and-see process.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In 2010, eighty-four percent of Akron Public School students were considered economically disadvantaged (“School”). That same year, the majority of elementary schools in the United States had populations with more than a quarter of the students qualifying as impoverished. Of those schools, 23 percent were classified as high-poverty, meaning that 76 to 100 percent of the students were eligible for a free or reduced price lunch (Institute). It is well documented that financially disadvantaged students are less likely to graduate from high school, less likely to attend college, more likely to take remedial classes if attending college, and more likely to be unemployed or incarcerated. In spite of federal intervention and reauthorizations of ESEA, by all accounts the education crisis in this country continues, and it seems that no one really knows what to do about it.

It is one of the most pressing problems facing the U.S., but considering the sheer volume of students attending public schools, as well as the dominant role poverty plays, it is not surprising that a workable solution has not been found. Unfortunately, the federal initiatives have not been successful in spite of the fact that the direr the circumstances; the farther reaching the legislation becomes. According to an article on reinventing public schools, the government operates the education system with a management model similar
to that of a factory, where everything is streamlined for efficiency, and ultimately it leaves parents, students and teachers to adjust (Denning). And yet, when things don’t work according to that model, as with NCLB, the solution seems to be: “Let’s have stronger management... tougher management. Let’s apply private sector methods. Let’s have more rigorous standards. Let’s do more testing. Let’s hammer the teachers who don’t perform” (Denning). It would be difficult to argue that that assessment is off track, as it accurately sums up the education reform in progress. Race to the Top (RTT) seeks to close the achievement gap by calling for more rigorous standards and testing, and more consequences for teachers than NCLB. In contrast to the complex affect of poverty on literacy and education, the reform seems to again offer a one-size-fits-all solution that is even more comprehensive and streamlined than in the past, due to the addition of common core standards to the equation.

In Arts of Living Kurt Spellmeyer calls for a reinvention of the Humanities, and his plea could certainly apply to the public education system, and the most recent school reform as well. Spellmeyer’s complaint with Humanities is that favoring specialists and theory renders them too out of touch with the outside world offer effective solutions. In Humanities he contends that the “problem is precisely that the view from above is too blurry and too dark, that no one below can hear us, or understand us if they did” (20). It parallels the issues in public education as states scramble to enact common core accountability testing in spite of low expectations for success, and teachers rely on a pacing guide to meet the more rigorous standard requirements instead of student readiness. Teachers and experts were consulted for Race to the Top, but the legislation still has been developed light years away from where it will be enacted.
Spellmeyer is not the first educator to site the distance between the specialist and the community they serve as a mitigating factor in the breakdown of the education process. While that may look different in the Humanities than it for does elementary school students, it still reflects the same problem: experts whose research is based on theory and critical analysis that somehow remains out of touch with the intended population. Spellmeyer has taken part in research that took over a decade and cost millions of dollars to conclude that graduates from impoverished New Jersey cities were *functionally illiterate* (125). In the end, all the researchers were left with was data, as no causes or solutions were determined. It is not much different than accountability test results that continue to show achievement gaps, but fail to give any clue as to why.

Spellmeyer’s solution for the humanities involves shifting focus to the small world, as the “the heart of the forest always lies where we find ourselves” (9). Conceptually, instead of a top-down theory, empowerment comes when one takes action in his own world (Spellmeyer, 8-9). In other words, the immediate world that surrounds an individual not only has the ability to be a significant influence, but also is likely to be a key, determining factor in how that person will perceive and connect to the larger one. Because of the security and the inclusion that can be experienced most readily in a small world, people are able to “see themselves as players in the larger world as well” (8). Relating that same small world concept to public education, it only makes sense that the world that is closest to a student will define how they see themselves, the larger world around them, and how they will fit into that definition.

A student’s small world, however, does not seem to fit easily into federal legislation. Public school education for most states is tied to federal mandates, and with
the Common Core, it is difficult to imagine how the local can have a significant influence. In light of that; however; communities, foundations, and even individuals are coming forward to help meet the needs of students. An example of this can be seen in the SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) program currently involving six Akron Public elementary schools (Higgins). Funded in Akron by the GAR foundation, the program targets three and four-year olds in each of the six districts to improve the reading, language and social skills of children prior to kindergarten by providing lessons with learning specialists for the parents and children, and gifting up to 50 books per child over a two-year period. Based on teacher feedback and an increase in kindergarten readiness test scores for children in the program, SPARK has proven to be successful, highlights the difference a small world can make (Rickenbacker). The achievement gap starts in kindergarten due to a lack of preparedness, and these are students who may not have had any other formal preparation prior to starting school.

Many, many examples of local involvement can be seen on both a large and a small scale in Akron and Northeast Ohio. To name a few: There is This City Reads!, which partners with organizations to promote early medical care and education for the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority, among a wide range of literacy activities around the city (“Resources”). The Key Bank Foundation has granted 1.5 million dollars to aid a joint venture between the Cleveland Metropolitan Schools and Cleveland State University to build a new STEM school to serve high school juniors and seniors (Magaw). There are individuals who volunteer to teach middle school students about business, and parents who started a math clinic at an impoverished Akron school. While

15 The GAR Foundation funds a range of causes throughout the region and considers the support of education at all levels a priority.
there may always be a debate about whether education should be a local or federal responsibility, nonetheless it is positive to see successful programs stemming from local communities involved in supplementing the highly legislated education process. Perhaps the support of the small is going to take to make a difference in the achievement for the students who are reached. Clearly, depending solely on federal programs is unrealistic.

On that note, it is not to say that national education initiatives have been purposely negligent. The fact is that the basis for federal legislation was, and continues to be, closing the achievement gaps for millions of students. It is a massive undertaking to create and enact education laws that will work across the country, for all students regardless of background. At this point poverty, and all the barriers that come with it, drives the crisis, as the economic achievement gap now affects twice as many students as the racial one. These divides are evident starting in kindergarten and do not widen or narrow through the years (Reardon 5). Critics of Race to the Top point out that policymakers continue to overlook the known correlation between home life, economic status, and school success thereby creating legislation as if all students are on equal footing (Ladd, Fiske). After all, that connection was initially addressed in the Coleman Report in the 1960s. Yet it still seems that the goal is to close the achievement gap for the poorest students without specifically addressing the significant role that poverty plays. It is not to say that the government has failed to act; it is just whether or not the action is appropriate for the magnitude and nature of the problem. Ladd and Fiske surmise that continuing to have the same standards for all with no regard for a student’s background will either result in schools continuing to fail or lowering of the standards (Source).
Historically this has been true of federal initiatives and, unfortunately makes the current reform similar to that of the past.

Aside from the promise of local communities helping their own, I had hoped there would be a more reassuring picture of the future of public education. It is, after all, something that ultimately affects everyone in this country in some capacity. While impoverished students are falling behind middle-class students across the nation, our students are falling behind those of other first-world countries across the globe. Testing not only indicates a failure to close the achievement gaps in literacy but, according to retired teacher Kenneth Bernstein, has narrowed the expectations and skill-set for all students, most notably in writing (Strauss). It is commonly reported that the United States ranks behind a list of other countries in math and science (“U.S. Students”), and vocabulary test results are at an all time low (Resmovits). While the disadvantaged fair the worst, the legislation is having far-reaching affects on all students. In fact, every year millions of jobs in the U.S. remain unfilled because there are too few candidates possessing the skills required, in spite of unemployment rates. In addition, the percentage of students required to take remedial classes in college continues to rise. That definitely makes a case for the career-and-college-ready common core standards, if in fact the theory behind it translates to reality. Only time will tell.

In my opinion, federal reform programs seem absolutely committed to uniform solutions that haven’t worked in the past. I agree with Ladd and Fiske that failing to acknowledge differences in student background or level of preparedness is the main reason why initiatives fail. An equal education does not mean that all students should have to follow the exact same path to learning. Meeting students where they are would be
much more beneficial. In other words, if another curriculum or alternative method would be more effective for impoverished students then political pressure should not stand as a barrier. One reason in particular that I favor common standards is that they can be applied to different curriculums while ensuring that necessary, streamlined benchmarks are being met. If, for example, tactics for improving cognitive strategies were added to the curriculum for some students, the common standards would still have to be met. Unfortunately, alternative approaches are often viewed as a deficit model as opponents claim it indicates a learning shortfall, which I fail to understand. In reality, test scores indicate that the education system is working fairly well for middle-class students, so there should be no shame in trying to do the same for impoverished students, regardless if it is a federal or local undertaking. It is disheartening to realize there is a significant amount of research on improving learning strategies for students who are struggling, but I saw no evidence that it was used for Race to the Top or any current education programs for new or existing teachers.

When considering the damning effects of poverty, I am reminded of the following: “Democracy always raises the fundamental question: what is the role of the most disadvantaged in relation to the public interest?” (West 2). The lack of progress made in closing the achievement gaps seems to answer the question. On that note, instead of looking to the schools for a solution, I would like to be able to argue that the answer rests in making societal changes, in which adverse effects of being poor are eradicated by the elimination of widespread poverty. I would like to think that actually could happen, as Pollyanna as that might sound. But, the current reality is that in many ways, the responsibility has been placed on the shoulders of the education system more than society
as a whole, and that limits the breadth of possibilities to what can be taught in the classroom. So, on the one hand, the belief that one can escape poverty through education is somewhat ironic considering that the education system has failed the poor. Yet, on the other hand, it seems unlikely that the cycle of poverty can change without successfully educating impoverished students. So where does that leave us?

For now it leaves us dependent on test results, with schools heavily invested in raising scores because so much is riding on it. Students in Akron are participating in extensive test practice at school, while parents are encouraged to work with their children on practice tests at home because, accurate or not, accountability test results are currently the best measure of student achievement according to the federal government. As with each initiative, there is always the hope that it will be different than the past, meaning that test scores will go up. And I truly hope they do. But, realistically until reform takes into account the effects of poverty on learning, I was left with the rather depressing impression that repairing the education crisis seems at once absolutely imperative and absolutely impossible.
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