

# *The* Achilles Heel *of* Education *and* How to Fix It

By Dr. C. Jackson Grayson, Jr.



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In Greek mythology, Achilles' mother attempted to make her son immortal by dipping him into the River Styx, believed to have miraculous powers. Achilles became a ferocious warrior, but not an invincible one. His mother had dipped him in the river by holding on to his heel, leaving him with a point of vulnerability. Although he fought heroically against the Trojans, Achilles was killed by Paris, who shot a poisonous arrow into his heel.

Like Achilles, public education has a critical flaw—an Achilles heel—a weakness of which it is unaware yet could have grave consequences. It's a weakness that has blocked wave after wave of reform from achieving transformative change, despite well-intentioned attempts and billions of dollars in funding. That weakness is education's singular focus on outcomes rather than the processes that bring them about.

If we want to improve outcomes such as test scores, graduation rates, AYP, teacher quality, and low-performing schools, we must also improve the processes that generate these outcomes. A golfer can't improve his or her golf score by only focusing on the outcomes—the scores. He or she must also focus on the *processes* that generate the scores. That's so sensible, it seems almost impossible that it would be ignored by educators, but it has been for decades.

Look at the diagram below. On the left side is Pathway 1 labeled "Process Management", focused on Improvement through Processes. Pathway 2 on the right side is "Performance Management" focused on Accountability through Outcomes.



It's a huge mistake to focus entirely on Pathway 2. It's an equal mistake to focus just on path 1. There are lines connecting the two pathways so that they can work synergistically to achieve results that satisfy stakeholders' goals and objectives. This diagram was adapted from a paper<sup>1</sup> by Dr. Don Berwick and his co-authors. While focused on transforming healthcare, the concept and methodology can work for any organization in any sector that wants to improve, including education.

It's a fact that other sectors, e.g., business, healthcare, government, and the military—have had to overcome the same obstacle. For many years, US businesses were losing their edge as more process-focused competitors, mainly from Japan, managed to produce substantial changes and achieve higher objectives while cutting costs and delivering faster. To succeed, U.S. organizations embraced process thinking and have experienced transformative change, in many cases avoiding bankruptcy or irrelevancy.

Is this being done in education? Yes, but only in a small handful of cases. While education will never go bankrupt or become irrelevant, the failure to grasp the importance of change can lead to continued mediocrity and further erosion of our nation's ability to compete in a global marketplace.

Education must change.

**So what's the holdup?**

There are two major culprits: external pressure and the lack of internal capacity.

**External pressure on outcomes.** Educators are still being hammered on, just as businesses were in the '70s and early '80s, to produce better outcomes, profits, EPS and cash flows. Today, educators are being hammered on for test scores, graduation rates, AYP progress, teacher effectiveness and closure of the achievement gap just to name a few. And if they fail to deliver, they are faced with sanctions, threats, transfers, bad publicity and even loss of jobs. The flaw is not that these outcomes are unimportant. Not at all! We need improvements in all of these areas. However, without tending to processes as well as outcomes, there's little chance of meaningful improvement.

External pressure on outcomes cascades down to the state governments, local governing or influential groups like school boards, parents, mayors' offices, press, community leaders and often from the leadership inside the school or district, such as the Superintendent or Principal. Even philanthropic foundations, policy wonks, evaluators, consultants and academics only want to see results.

But as business finally learned, applying pressure only on outcomes doesn't work. While it might extract small gains, it also creates significant negative side effects that offset the gains. That is certainly not the path to transformation.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald M. Berwick, MD, Brent James, MD, MStat, and Molly Joel Coyle, M.D. "Connections Between Quality Measurement and Improvement," *Medical Care*, Volume 41, No. 1, Supplement pp. 1-30-1-38, Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins, Inc.

**The internal block.** Most educators understand the word “process” in a general sense (all work is a process). But they never really think about systematically working to improve their processes to get both efficiency and effectiveness. They don’t have the time, know-how or support. No one asks for or rewards them for process improvement, or helps them to build capacity to initiate process management. Plus, they have to worry about outcomes.

With all that outcome pressure, can anything be done to remove the block and add process management to improvement efforts?

Yes.

One place to start would be to have all the official governing bodies to at least ask for process measures, to fund process management training, to reward efficiency as well as effectiveness, and to help good process improvement best practices to go to sale.

Another would be leaders on the ground—the Superintendents and Principals, and other Cabinet members—to encourage and support process improvement projects that tackle key processes, help them to build process maps to reveal waste, build capacity for process management, and use organization-wide process management themselves. That could start what could become a tidal wave.

It did with business.

### How do I know and why do I have the audacity to make such assertions?

I am Jack Grayson, Founder, Chairman and CEO of the American Productivity & Quality Center (APQC), a nonprofit organization based in Houston, Texas. I and our 80 person staff have worked for more than 33 years to help thousands of organizations outside of education—business, healthcare, government, and the military—improve their operations and obtain transformative changes. The methodology we use is known most commonly as Process and Performance Management (PPM).

Over the past decade, we worked at understanding K-12 education and helping over 250 school districts begin the journey toward transformative improvement from both Process and Performance Management. We found that by far, the bulk of schools and districts don’t map their processes, don’t measure them and don’t compare them. They don’t think across functions to improve them, don’t have process owners, and don’t manage their processes.

Because of this general lack of knowledge about process management in the education arena, APQC started a demonstration **Process and Performance Management** project in January 2009 that we call **North Star**. We have successfully piloted a project at 11 leading school districts in which leaders have been trained and coached on PPM. Districts include: Aldine, TX; Alief, TX; Brevard County, FL; Clark County, NV; Ft. Bend, TX; Fulton County, GA; Hampton City Schools, VA; Iredell-Statesville Schools, NC; Jenks Schools, OK; Montgomery County, MD; and Poudre, CO.

We trained the leaders of the districts referenced above, helped them to select projects, and are now coaching each district to help with implementation. These districts have already made the biggest change – they are now aware of the critical importance of process management to their organizations, but they have at least 19 more road blocks standing in their path toward process improvement (more on these in future white papers).

Still, the focus on process is already yielding substantial changes in outcomes. The changes are already taking place. On-the-ground projects like this are needed across the nation so that educators can learn about process and performance management, but also put it to work in their own districts.

Here is what a few leading administrators have said about their experience thus far in the North Star project.

*“I have been in education for 42 years but have never seen a project like APQC’s North Star that has the potential to completely transform the educational system in this country.”*

—Dr. Michael Perich  
Director Continuous Improvement  
Montgomery County public schools

*“We have gone through the reform after reform cycle for so long I had almost given up that we would ever have some way to drastically change the education system... I believe this is our time and ‘defining moment’ to make the North Star Project the true systemic reform that is needed to change the landscape and future educational school systems throughout the United States.”*

—Patrick J. Russo Ed.D.  
former Superintendent  
Hampton City Schools  
Hampton, Virginia  
(present Superintendent,  
Henrico County Public Schools, VA)

## Summary


To date, no single law or measure or reform concept has been able to produce transformative change. If the U.S. education system continues to do what it has done, it will continue to get what it’s got. That’s just not good enough.

So what are educators to do? They need to recognize that outcomes are created by processes, and if we don’t improve the processes that generate the outcomes, we can’t improve outcomes.

Can education change from focusing only on performance management to combining it with process management? Yes.

But will it? I don’t know.

What I do know is that after 33 years of working on improvement with other sectors, and more than 10 years of involvement with K-12, I am totally convinced that there is only one thing that has the power to transform American education: Process Management and Performance Management.

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In my next white paper, I will expand on the inner workings of the North Star program, how it's constructed, why it's effective and how to measure its success, based on the stories of North Star participants.

### Learn More

View additional testimonials and register to receive future white papers at [www.apqceducation.org/northstar](http://www.apqceducation.org/northstar).

Or, call Melanie Pavlik at 800-776-9676 to discuss the North Star programs and resources available to support your district.

## About the Author

### **Dr. C. Jackson Grayson, Jr. is Founder, Chairman and CEO, APQC.**

Dr. Grayson has a BBA from Tulane University, an MBA from the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania and a doctorate in business from the Harvard Business School. His academic career has included professorships at Harvard, Stanford, Tulane and SMU, and he has taught in business schools in France and Switzerland. He has also been a Dean of two business schools—at Tulane University and at SMU where he became known for instituting innovations in business and education.

Dr. Grayson was selected in 1971 to be Chairman of the Price Commission under President Nixon, and it was there that he discovered how little American corporations knew about productivity and quality. So, when he left government, he founded the nonprofit APQC (American Productivity & Quality Center) in 1975, and has used process and performance management to help organizations improve their efficiency and effectiveness. In 1990, *Business Week* said of Grayson, "Few, if any, individual Americans have done more during the last 20 years to shape the country's economic future for the better."

For more than 33 years, APQC has worked primarily with business, healthcare, government, and the military. In 2008, APQC started a pilot demonstration project with several leading districts as part of its North Star Plan to help transform the U.S. public education system.

Grayson is a CPA and has been on the board of directors of large corporations. Grayson's career however, is not confined to business. He believes in variety, constant learning, experimentation, and fun. His career has included being a newspaper reporter in New Orleans, a special agent of the FBI, a manager of a cotton farm in Louisiana, a member of an export-import firm, and an owner of race horses. Grayson recently went sky-diving.

## About APQC

The American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC) is the leading resource for performance analytics, best practices and process improvement worldwide. Our research studies, benchmarking databases and renowned Knowledge Base provide managers with intelligence that they can use to transform their organizations for better results. A member-based nonprofit founded in 1977, APQC currently serves over 750 of the *Fortune* Global 1000 companies as well as hundreds of healthcare, government and nonprofit organizations.

For more than 10 years, APQC has worked with over 250 school districts to help them improve efficiency and effectiveness. APQC's North Star plan is aimed to transform the U.S. education system using the proven methodology of process and performance management.

Learn more at [www.apqceducation.org/northstar](http://www.apqceducation.org/northstar) or call our Education Team at 800-776-9676.