

**Applying Wexler's Argument to the Texas Superintendent Standards**

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The Texas Superintendent Standards describe what an entry-level superintendent in Texas must know and be able to do. They are organized into three domains (Leadership of the Educational Community, Instructional Leadership, and Administrative Leadership) and span ten competencies that cover areas like ethics, curriculum, professional development (PD), and financial management (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2020). No matter which competency you look at, the standards consistently come back to the same idea. The superintendent's most important job is making sure every student succeeds.

The educational philosophy that runs through these standards is closely tied to what Schiro (2013) calls the Social Efficiency ideology. This ideology treats education as a purposeful, results-oriented process. It values alignment, measurable outcomes, and the efficient use of resources to meet societal needs. The standards reflect this through their emphasis on data-driven decisions, accountability, and strategic resource management. But they also draw from the Scholar Academic tradition, which values subject-matter rigor and disciplinary knowledge, and the Learner Centered tradition, which keeps the focus on meeting each student's individual needs (Schiro, 2013).

This paper argues that Natalie Wexler's (2019) *The Knowledge Gap* gives superintendents an important and urgent tool for keeping that commitment to students front and center. Wexler shows that American elementary schools have largely traded rich content instruction for repetitive skills practice. That trade-off is quietly failing students, especially those from low-income families. When read alongside the Texas Superintendent Standards, her argument reveals that strong instructional leadership requires taking a hard look at whether the curriculum

students receive is actually building the knowledge they need to become capable readers and thinkers.

### **Overview of the Wexler Text**

In *The Knowledge Gap*, Wexler (2019) makes a straightforward but unsettling argument. American schools have built their approach to reading instruction on a flawed assumption. That assumption is that reading comprehension is a skill that students can practice on any text and gradually get better at, regardless of what the text is about. Many educators believe that if students can learn to find the main idea, make inferences, and summarize, they will eventually be able to understand anything they read.

Wexler (2019) draws on cognitive science to show why this does not work. Comprehension is not primarily a skill. It depends on background knowledge. A reader who already knows something about a topic can make sense of a text on that topic far more easily than a reader who does not. When students spend their school days practicing reading strategies on disconnected, low-stakes texts (sharks one day, weather the next, ancient Egypt the day after) they never build the kind of accumulated knowledge that would allow them to understand increasingly complex material. The result is stagnant reading scores. Wexler (2019) notes that roughly two-thirds of American students have consistently scored below proficiency on national reading assessments for more than two decades, despite enormous investments in literacy instruction.

The equity dimension of this problem is where Wexler's (2019) argument becomes most pressing. Students from higher-income families often build background knowledge outside of school through books at home, family trips, museums, and conversations with adults. Students from low-income families rely on school for much of what they know about the world. When

school spends most of its time on reading skills rather than content, those students fall further behind. Not because they are less capable, but because they are not being given the knowledge they need. Wexler (2019) cites research showing that while about half of students in middle-class schools experience repetitive, skills-focused instruction, in schools serving low-income students that figure climbs to 91 percent. This is not a neutral fact. It is a pattern that shapes the life outcomes of real children.

The solution Wexler (2019) points toward is a return to coherent, cumulative, content-rich curriculum that teaches history, science, and other subjects in a planned sequence so that students build knowledge year by year. She is not calling for the elimination of literacy instruction. She is calling for literacy instruction that is grounded in substance.

### **Connecting the Standards to Wexler's Argument**

#### **Competency 005: Curriculum, Alignment, and Assessment**

Competency 005 calls on the superintendent to facilitate the planning and implementation of strategic plans that enhance teaching and learning, ensure alignment among curriculum, resources, and assessment, and promote the use of varied assessments to measure student performance (TEA, 2020). The heart of this competency is the idea that superintendents are responsible for making sure what students are taught is rigorous, coherent, and aligned across grade levels.

Wexler's (2019) argument fits directly into this responsibility. A superintendent who is reviewing curriculum for quality should be asking not just whether it is aligned to standards, but whether it builds knowledge over time. Is there a logical sequence of topics across grade levels? Do students in third grade know things that prepare them for fourth grade? Is social studies and science content protected, or is it the first thing to disappear when test prep season arrives? These

are curriculum questions, and Competency 005 places them squarely on the superintendent's desk.

The standard's emphasis on assessment is also worth examining through Wexler's lens. If the assessments a district uses only measure reading skills disconnected from content, they will not capture the knowledge gaps that may be driving low comprehension scores. A student who struggles with a reading passage may not lack strategic ability. They may simply lack the background knowledge the text assumes. Superintendents who take this competency seriously should push for assessments that attend to what students actually know, not just how they perform on generic skill tasks.

### **Competency 006: Instructional Program and Equity**

Competency 006 asks the superintendent to advocate, promote, and sustain an instructional program and district culture that are conducive to student learning (TEA, 2020). It also calls for ensuring responsiveness to the diverse needs of students, including those from different cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

This is where Wexler's (2019) equity argument speaks most directly to the superintendent's role. If the campuses in a superintendent's district are narrowing the curriculum to reading and math by cutting science and social studies to make room for more test preparation, then those campuses are not meeting the spirit of Competency 006. They may look organized and data-driven on the outside, but students are being shortchanged. As Wexler (2019) describes, one teacher she observed spent an entire lesson teaching students to identify captions in photographs. The skill was the goal. What the photos were actually about did not matter at all.

A superintendent who truly cares about equity cannot ignore this pattern. The students who are most harmed by a content-free curriculum are the same students the equity provisions of

Competency 006 are meant to protect. Building and sustaining an instructional program worthy of that standard means making sure every student has access to rich, knowledge-building content every single day. Not just those whose families can fill the gaps at home.

### **Competency 007: Professional Development**

Competency 007 focuses on implementing a staff evaluation and development system and selecting appropriate models for supervision and professional growth (TEA, 2020). It calls for PD that is grounded in adult learning principles and supported by follow-up strategies that help teachers actually implement what they have learned.

Wexler (2019) points out that the skills-first approach to literacy is deeply embedded in how teachers are trained. Most teachers are not making a deliberate choice to avoid content. They are doing what they were taught to do in their preparation programs and what their school culture reinforces every day. Changing that requires sustained, intentional PD. It is not enough to hand teachers a new curriculum and expect transformation. They need to understand the research behind knowledge-rich instruction, practice it with support, and receive coaching as they work through the challenges of changing long-held habits.

Competency 007 gives superintendents the responsibility and the leverage to make that happen. Designing PD that helps teachers understand why content matters and supporting instructional leaders who can coach that shift at the campus level is one of the most concrete ways a superintendent can respond to what Wexler (2019) is asking for.

### **My Context and My Perspective**

I work as the Elementary Mathematics Coordinator for my school district, overseeing curriculum implementation across fourteen elementary campuses. My role is focused on math, but I sit inside the same instructional system Wexler is talking about. I coach instructional

specialists, facilitate professional learning communities (PLCs), and work closely with principals on improving what happens in classrooms. Because of that work, I spend a lot of time thinking about what students are actually learning, not just what teachers are covering. I have watched literacy blocks run for two and a half hours while science gets squeezed into the last fifteen minutes of the day. Sometimes it does not happen at all. And even in math, I have seen the same pattern Wexler describes. Teachers move through disconnected topics without building on what came before, because the pressure is to cover standards rather than develop deep understanding. Students who do not have the background to make sense of a problem are left guessing instead of thinking.

Reading Wexler (2019) was both validating and uncomfortable. Validating because it gave language and research to something I had already sensed was off. Uncomfortable because it made it harder to look away. The students Wexler is describing are students from low-income communities who depend on school to build their understanding of the world. Those are the students my district serves. When schools prioritize skills over content, they are not closing the achievement gap. They are deepening it.

I agree with Wexler's core argument. Cognitive science is real. Comprehension depends on knowledge, and a curriculum that does not build knowledge is not doing its most important job. I also agree that this is an equity issue more than it is a literacy issue. The families of our students are not able to supplement what is missing at school in the same ways that wealthier families can. School has to be enough, and right now, in too many places, it is not.

Where I would push back a little is on the question of how change actually happens inside a district. My district is in its first year of implementing Bluebonnet Learning, a new K-5 math curriculum resource. I see every day how hard it is to shift instructional practice. Even

when the curriculum is good and the people are committed, teachers need time to trust a new approach. Instructional leaders need support to coach it well. A superintendent who reads Wexler and responds by swapping one curriculum package for another without attending to the professional culture around it will likely produce the same surface-level compliance that Wexler criticizes in the current system.

That said, the discomfort of change is not a reason to stay still. Going forward, I plan to bring Wexler's questions into the conversations I have with the principals and instructional specialists I work with. Are students building knowledge, or just practicing skills? Is science and social studies content protected in the schedule, or is it treated as optional? Do our literacy materials actually give students something meaningful and rich to read about, or are they mostly just tools for practicing a skill? These are not always easy conversations to start, but they are the right ones. Wexler (2019) did not change everything I believe about teaching and learning, but she sharpened my thinking. In my role, that matters.

### **Conclusion**

The Texas Superintendent Standards set a high bar for instructional leadership. They call for curriculum that is rigorous and aligned, instructional programs that serve every student, and PD that actually changes practice. Wexler's (2019) *The Knowledge Gap* does not undermine those standards. It strengthens the case for taking them seriously. She shows, through classroom observations and a deep engagement with cognitive science, that the gap between where students are and where they could be is not primarily a skills gap. It is a knowledge gap. And closing it is exactly the kind of work the superintendent standards are asking district leaders to do.

## References

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