Lauren Resnick: – Who does need some introduction, even though he asked me not to do it. So I’m gonna not fully comply with his request. And I’m carrying here a brief biography of him, but I will comply by not reading that to you. I think it’s probably in your folders anyhow. So I want to tell you about the first time that I remember meeting David, although I think it might not have really been the first time.

I’m trying to get out of the light! [Laughter]

Okay. And he was invited to a sort of staff meeting where we were beginning in the Institute to think about what our stance was gonna be on the fact that new standards were maybe going to come our way. It was before the Common Core State Standards effort announced, and another person we were working with, whom I won’t name tonight, asked if maybe at our next meeting he could bring David Coleman with him. And I said, “Who’s David Coleman?” and he gave me something like what I have in my hand. Those characteristics didn’t seem particularly relevant to what we were gonna do, you know, like being a Rhodes Scholar and having both Cambridge and Oxford degrees – all that kind of stuff. That’s nice, but it’s really not so relevant. [Laughter]

But I sat up and I remember being with Tony, who was there, when he handed out a list of ten – this was within moments of arrival from the airport – handed out a list of ten proposed standards that at that moment – some of you probably have seen a variance of this – at that moment seemed as reasonable as anything else for the new English standards that were gonna be forthcoming. The first one said, “Read like a detective.” That’s it. That was standard number one – so powerful a one that it’s driven out of my mind the other nine. But you have to imagine a bunch of Institute for Learning people and School of Education people, leaders in English education – I’m talking about Tony now – leaders in some kind of trans- relationship between psychology and schooling. And most or some subset of our fellow, ones involved in English/Language Arts. And we look at this and my memory is there was a long moment of silence, right, Tony? Do you remember that, too, David? [Laughter]

And what I really want to say is that reading like a detective is now part of our core standards. It’s not there in words, but it informs – that was a kind of inventive way to put an idea on the table that established a standard, very different from – I don’t know what I can say – the boring ones that we grew up with and are used to, like what I put together in New Standards. They were
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standards for English, but if anybody ever wrote that way in my books they’d get pushed out.

But read like a detective would’ve made it into the books, and you can see if you think about it for a minute what that would mean. I’m not gonna do it, but I am tempted to ask you to turn to your neighbor and offer a – let’s do it. What do you think is the definition of read like – what does read like a detective mean to you? Let’s talk about it for a second. [Pause]

Eh, it worked. Okay, it worked. Now I’m gonna give you the answer.

David Coleman: All the evidence is there and it all matters.

Lauren Resnick: Okay, so this is the kind of person we are gonna be privileged to here tonight. He has been involved in virtually every step of setting the national standards, and he doesn’t have a single credential for it. He’s never taught in an elementary school – I think. You know, I actually don’t know. He’s never edited a scholarly journal, but I think he has written scholarly papers. And a variety of other things that have – you know, everybody here has done some of, he hasn’t done. [Laughter] You told me you didn’t want to do a standard – [Laughter] so he hasn’t done the standard things, and now he’s gonna tell you what he has done, or what he probably will say he has not done others have done, but which he has helped others to want to do and to ______ do. And we’re all gonna be living with the fruits of that, for the next five years, so listen carefully.

[Pause]

David Coleman: Can you hear me? You know, you’d think someone with Lauren’s experience would understand you never tell the truth when you’re introducing someone. It’s kind of like a eulogy in reverse. I think the clear lesson from tonight is don’t ask Lauren to speak at your funeral. [Laughter] She clearly doesn’t understand what eulogy stands for.

No, I thank you so much for your attention. I know it’s getting late and it’s after dinner now, and so I’m gonna be – try to be brief. I’m gonna talk in two parts. I’m gonna first try to answer a very specific questions, which is I think the title that Nancy and her team put together, which is what should we do over the next two years? I’m gonna dare to be exceedingly specific about that question because
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it’s a question that is very much on your minds as you’re embarking on this work.
And it is my style to think that anything vague in response to that question is
totally not helpful. So I aim to be extremely specific, and hence vulnerable to
criticism. [Laughter]

The second thing – I feel since I’m already bloodied I might as well really go for it
and teach a couple of poems in front of an excellent poet, who is Tony, sitting in
front of me. So he might just mug me at any moment during the second part of it
where we’re gonna look at two poems together, ‘cause I thought that would be
fun, a kind of after-dinner pleasure and an after-dinner picture of what this kind of
instruction might look like.

If you don’t mind, I’d like to talk a minute about how this work builds on some of
the work that IFL has done over the years, and it gives me a chance to basically
do a very important rhetorical maneuver, which is to blame Lauren. [Laughter]
So if there are aspects of what I’m about to say that you disagree with and if the
Common Core is kind of a pain in the ass, built on top of your other duties while
funding is being cut, don’t blame me. Blame Lauren, because there is clearly no
way this country would be talking about 46 states adopting a set of common
standards had not a somewhat younger, still revolutionary mind thought that this
nation needed a new set of standards. And for that I am most grateful to you.

I have learned some other things with Lauren along the way. One of them is the
kind of humility she talked about, about qualifications. I actually think it’s really
important to try to base what I’m about to say to you on evidence I share with you
rather than on the sands of my qualifications. So if I ask you or talk to you about
doing something it should be evident that it makes sense to you to do, ‘cause I
have no other authority. I will talk to you about the standards ______ ‘cause
you’re looking to me to do that, but I also hope to talk to you about evidence we
encountered along the way of developing that we found overwhelming and
compelling, enough so that we deemed it essential to act on for the safety and
well-being of children.

Lauren, though, has challenged me over the years with some more ideas, and
some I want to put on the table for you, all in the sake of striking back. One of
them is that these standards are worthy of nothing if the assessments built on
them are not worthy of teaching to, period. This is quite a demanding charge, I
might add to you, because it has within it the kind of statement – you know, “Oh,
the standards were just fine, but the real work begins now in defining the
assessment,” which if you were involved in the standards is a slightly exhausting
statement to make.

But let’s be rather clear: we’re at the start of something here, and its promise –
our top priorities in our organization, and I’ll tell you a little bit more about our
organization, is to do our darnedest to ensure that the assessment is worthy of
your time, is worthy of imitation. It was Lauren who propounded the great rule
that I think is a statement of reality, though not a pretty one, which is teachers will
teach towards the test. There is no force strong enough on this earth to prevent
that. There is no amount of hand-waving, there’s no amount of saying, “They
teach to the standards, not the test; we don’t do that here.” Whatever. The truth
is – and if I misrepresent you, you are welcome to take the mic back. But the
truth is teachers do. Tests exert an enormous effect on instructional practice,
direct and indirect, and it’s hence our obligation to make tests that are worthy of
that kind of attention. It is in my judgment the single most important work we
have to do over the next two years to ensure that that is so, period. So when you
ask me, “What do we have to do over the next years?” we gotta do that. If we do
anything else over the next two years and don’t do that, we are stupid and shall
be betrayed again by shallow tests that demean the quality of classroom
practice, period.

I could talk also about things I’ve learned from Tony and things I’ve learned from
the team he works with, but they’re gonna so disagree with what I’ll say next that
I don’t want to shame them by associating themselves with my work any further.
But let me begin.

I want to give you an outline of the core standards, the evidence on which they’re
based, but I want to be very practical if that’s okay. I think you’ve heard enough
about the standards in general terms, so I want to, if it’s okay with you, cut to the
quick and be like if I was a superintendent like my friend Clayton over here –
back in the saddle, congratulations; that’s wonderful. If I were a superintendent
in his team, what exactly would I do year one and year two based on evidence,
based on what the standards demand, that will help my children? Even though I
get it: the state tests are not gonna change over those two years and you have to
perform on existing metrics. You are caught in a bind and I want to be honest
about it, right? You’ve got the Common Core and you’ve got your existing state
standards and work, and if you’re truly screwed you’re in Texas. [Laughter] My
friends from Texas in the back are like, “Can we leave now and go to a bar?
‘Cause we didn’t even adopt these stupid standards yet.” [Laughter]
But I want to try to talk to you tonight about things I think are worth doing anyway. Does that make sense? That is, I want to talk to you about work worth doing, that I think will aid your performance on existing instruments and far more on the instruments to come. Am I being clear? I am only interested in things you can actually do. I’m not in a dreamy moment conversation type thing. I’m interested in taking seriously the facts as they are before you; that is, the real people you have now working with you and for you, the real kids now in front of you with their deficits and all their needs, et cetera. So with that in mind, I’m about to jump in, but I’m just gonna say one word about my own organization, which is Student Achievement Partners.

Student Achievement Partners, all you need to know about us are a couple things. One is we’re composed of that collection of unqualified people who were involved in developing the common standards. And our only qualification was our attention to and command of the evidence behind them. That is, it was our insistence in the standards process that it was not enough to say you wanted to or thought that kids should know these things, that you had to have evidence to support it, frankly because it was our conviction that the only way to get an eraser into the standards writing room was with evidence behind it, ‘cause otherwise the way standards are written you get all the adults into the room about what kids should know, and the only way to end the meeting is to include everything. That’s how we’ve gotten to the typical state standards we have today.

The notion of evidence was a way to do two things: was to focus on what mattered most, and to erase much of which surrounded it. I think that core principle will be the most important single one for you to take away tonight. If you see these standards as an addition to your current tasks, as one more burden on an overburdened cart, you will fail. If after my remarks it is not absolutely clear how much you can stop doing and what you can focus on instead doing, we’re nowhere. We do not have the resources, leisure, or time to invest in a whole new set of initiatives around these Common Core standards. Is that clear? We have to clearly understand what is removed. Teachers need to understand what is removed. What is removed to make way for the work that matters? Does that make sense? Otherwise it is simply an impossible task. So I’m gonna talk a lot about what goes as well as what stays. Clear enough so far?

In terms of Student Achievement Partners we’re composed largely of those people who were involved in authoring the standards and developing the evidence, even though as it’s rightly told, you know, both teachers’ unions, teachers from throughout the country, parents, 48 states – everybody was
involved in writing these standards. So I’m only talking about writing in a manner
of speaking, but we were involved in developing them and had an occasional turn
of phrase, like reading like a detective, which Tony Petrosky wrote me the single
most beautiful e-mail about that I still keep a printed copy of nearby, as to what
that really means.

But briefly we, the authors of the standards, hold on to three principles now going
forward, those of us who have joined Student Achievement Partners. They are
the following: Always be overwhelmed by loud voices in back of you. [Laughter]
There are three. So those of us who have chosen to work together have chosen
three principles. Number one: We do not and will not accept money from the
publishers of any curriculum or assessment at any time, whether for profit or not-
for-profit.

The second interesting one is we will not compete for any state or district RFPs.
We adopt this second one because we believe in a vibrant market of other
people competing for these things, also ‘cause we think the district and state
RFPs tend to suck. We think that if states and districts are gonna get better stuff,
they have to rewrite their requests. Does that make sense? That if the RFPs are
weak, so the vendor community reaction is weak. And it would be stupid if we
were trying to write the RFPs and then compete for them. So when I talk to you
tonight it is – if any mistake I make intellectually or socially is solely a result of our
stupidity, but not a result of our avarice or desire for material gain. [Laughter]

The third principle is we have no intellectual property of our own, which hopefully
does not mean that we have no ideas. It does mean, however, that anything I
share with you and anything we in the future share with you, exemplars,
anything, you can take, reuse, make better, especially without attribution.
Nothing bothers me more when it’s like copyright this group – please say – no,
unnecessary. And after I’m done you’ll want to distance yourselves as much
from me as possible, so that probably helps you, but I really mean it. So
everything we develop and give is usable, reusable, changeable, without any
cost or attribution.

So those are our three principles. And now let’s get to what do mean tonight
about what you should be doing over the next two years regarding the standards.
Let’s start with math and then do literacy. I’ll probably spend a little more time on
literacy because as weak as my qualifications are there, in math they’re even
more desperate in their lacking. [Laughter]
In mathematics the most shocking thing about the high-performing countries that are beating the pants off us in math – see, I think there’s an image in this country about the East Asian countries and other high-performing countries in math. If we were all interviewed I think we have a shared picture in private, which is this: They’re working harder than we are, their kids work harder, they may not be quite as creative but that’s only gonna last for so long, and this country’s best days – we’re gonna get overwhelmed by this kind of tidal wave of harder work. That’s I think the basic feeling of the American country today. Strikingly, though, the Singapore website, as Lauren’s great friend Phil Dara has pointed out, does not say, “Work harder, do more,” which is what we expect it to say. It says in fact, “Teach less, learn more.” What is most striking about the high-performing countries in mathematics is they focus on far fewer topics and do them with much greater depth and sophistication than we do here. To be precise, in kindergarten through second grade, three and only three topics are common to the high-performing countries in mathematics. Those are whole numbers, their operations, and the quantities they measure. That’s it.

Following that focus, the Common Core standards now adopted focus relentlessly in kindergarten through second grade on the addition and subtraction of whole numbers and the quantities they measure. You could describe kindergarten through second grade as a master class in addition and subtraction.

Interestingly, for my friends in Texas, deliberately in high-performing countries fractions are postponed. One thing that is so stupid about who’s standards are higher is the kind of “if you introduce it earlier, you’re higher.” I think you’re only higher in the kind of pot-induced fantasy rather than the reality of performance. [Laughter] That is, it’s not higher to introduce these things earlier. It in fact doesn’t allow for the real mastery and muscularity of performance around whole numbers.

In third through fifth grade, as I’ve hinted, the mighty art enters that most precedes and predicts algebraic performance, which is fractions and its closely-related ideas of division and subtraction, ‘cause obviously fractions are already beginning to show you what division looks like, as well as what multiplication means. Those core capacities over third through fifth grade pave the way for proportional reasoning, of course, and expansion to the rest of the number system, and if you’re working at a deliberate speed in math, to handle linear equations and algebra in grade eight.
That in mathematics – think of it like a trunk of a tree or the handle of a fork. This core of math is necessary for all the future work you can do in math and enables all the future work. That is, with command of those arenas of mathematics and those arenas alone, you can do tremendous work in data analysis, advanced work in algebra and, like, the calculus and the trigonometry, as well as modeling multiple representation.

Obviously along with focus comes depth. That is, when I say just do fewer things, it’s not like, “Woo-hoo, holiday! We can just do less stuff and go home earlier,” right? It means you do those things at a greater depth. What exactly do I mean by depth? I mean three things. I mean fluency, application, and understanding.

By fluency in math, I want you to imagine being fluent in French or another foreign language where you do not hesitate to solve a problem. There are a few key fluencies – the standards are strict in identifying only one to two per year in kindergarten through eighth grade. But of these things, yes, people have to have memory, yes practice, yes rote in a sense, a kind of ability of fluency through repeated practice. Sometimes people on the left are very uncomfortable with that, but for those areas of math it’s extremely important you have that fluidity.

But at the same time around those core areas, application and understanding matter equally. So when I say application in math, that’s your ability to apply math to a situation even when you’re not asked to do so. And you can see the importance of that. When someone’s about to rip you off with a mortgage, they rarely say, “It’s a good time to do the math. You should consider pulling out a calculator right now.” Math is only powerful – and I’m sure all of you notice this in your lives, that math is powerful in career and college because mathematical people have this awesome power to choose to apply it when the rest of the people aren’t. They see at a moment that a key ratio is operating that breaks the problem. It’s not that someone handed them a problem and said, “This is a ratio right now.” So if math is to have its power it must have application built into it. And of course understanding is the ability to apply that core set of math to surprising and new problem types, to a wide range of problem types.

What then does this mean for assessment? Because we are going back to that. I think one of the most simple reasons that teachers do not trust assessment today and parents do not is a very simple problem. I’m gonna put it as simply as I can. There is on average at least 40 topics annually in the American mathematics curriculum, period. Does anyone know what the average number of
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questions is on a standardized test? Forty – good guess. What that means, is
on a standardized test you typically have at best two, maybe three questions on
a topic, and then you’re not gonna cover some of the others, so it’s like Russian
roulette. What’s gonna get examined this year? And at best I get, none of us,
no physotechian, Lauren’s much more sophisticated at that stuff than I am, but
basically the more items you have to explore someone’s understanding of
something, the more reliable your understanding of their understanding is gonna
be, and the more different ways you can see them explore, right?

Imagine for a moment if 50 to 70 percent of an exam, instead of being all over
the place, focused on the major mathematics work of that grade. And the reason
why that would be so honest is without that mathematical mastery, these
students are not in fact going forward. Math tests as they are today are actually
an illusion, 'cause you can pass them without a mastery of the math you really
need to go forward. Do you see what I’m saying? If you get all this other –
patterns and all this other stuff we do in early grades, do some data problems,
bait and switch, jump around a little bit, jump to the next topic but you don’t have
fractions, you are truly screwed, but you may have passed the test. Do you see
the problem?

So when we redesign assessment, focus is one of the most important principles
so that it offers an in-depth, diverse look at the masteries that matter most. And
that way it offers what we should look for in assessment, which is something like
a job description or a set of priorities that really affect you, that say, “Without this
students shall not go forward, and hence in my classroom they are a subject of
concentration.” So in mathematics, focus and its closely-related concept of
coherence and depth – focus, coherence so it builds on one another, and depth
are at the heart of these math standards.

We could do a lot more on math, but I want to pause now and say, “Okay, got it.
What the heck do I do about it? And what do I do about it over a two-year
period?” I’m gonna answer you in ruthlessly blunt terms.

Year one: Already we’re talking about, like, the spring at best, right? I mean,
we’re here in December – you know, are we talking year one being next year? If
you’re gonna do anything fast, I think you lead with focus. The most important
single idea in these mathematics standards is that some math is much more
important than others. This is confused by all instructional materials that are put
in front of teachers because they present it all as if it’s equally important. Do you
see the problem? That is a deliberate confusion. It’s not so. There’s a core of
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math that matters a lot more. So if you don’t get in K-2 addition and subtraction
of whole numbers and the quantities they measure you’re really in trouble, and if
you master it you’re really very — you see what I’m saying? So what I say to you
this year is do a few things about focus for sure.

Number one: Before you get new, great — I would love to tell you that I have new,
great mathematical curricula for you which examines the focus areas and
beautiful depth and ability. That’s year two or three, right? Let’s just admit.
When publishers are telling you they already have great Common Core-aligned
materials in mathematics I hope you have a little skepticism in you, ‘cause it’s
amazing that they developed them before the core standards were developed.
[Laughter] But what you can do is take your existing work and really focus. So
what we’ve given you in your folders is a description of the major work in math for
each grade, and we will follow up and share with IFL, our partners. As we refine
our sense of what the priorities in math are, we’ll give it to you.

Now — so what I’m saying is first I would go through your existing curricula. I
would make sure first that your teachers know — every teacher — the major work
of each grade. It’s like a couple of sentences long, so I’m not talking about, like,
a crazy — they should know the key fluencies for every grade, period. Then you
as a district or together what we can do is go through existing curricula and find
those, and at least make more time so that teachers can spend the time and
work to have the time to teach and their students can have time to practice
towards those areas. Am I making sense? That’s phase one. Most state
standards based on any calculus take about 30 years to deliver, so it is okay to
begin with focus, if you get my gist.

The game in math in America has been quite damaging, because the things I’m
talking about, which sounds like arithmetic and basic things, are actually very
difficult. Make no mistake: Fractions are hard, as any of you know who have
really wrestled with them. And so what we’ve done is we’ve given kids and
teachers the out of moving on to the next topic. You know, if you don’t do that,
move on to the next topic. And that’s not how math works. Without those core
areas the door is in fact closed. So the first thing I would do is go through
existing materials, focus it.

Number two: All your professional development spending in year one goes
towards what? The major work of the grade, period. No negotiation. Only
professional development in the district, major work of the grade.
Three: Interim assessment, your other tool right before you. What does it focus on? Overwhelmingly the major work of the grade. Now you may say, “This is a little spooky, Dave, ‘cause I’ve still got dumb state test coming that measures the whole waterfront. And I’m a superintendent and I’m fighting for my life every year.” Hong Kong covers in its curriculum half of the topic that are on the TIMSS International Math Test. Half of them are in the Hong Kong curriculum, 50 percent. The US covers all of the TIMSS topics in our curriculum. Who performs better on the TIMSS test? Like by a lot; it’s like not even close. Why? Because the core of math I’m describing to you is so flexible and powerful that it applies to most of the other math of the grade. Do you see what I’m saying? So it is a safe bet to begin focusing now, and then in my second year I would drive depth as much as possible. I would introduce some depth this year; that is, the notions of fluency, application, understanding. But it’s gonna take time to gradually teach teachers what does application, understanding look like in their specific areas of fractions, et cetera. That I think unfolds in year two. By then tools will have begun to develop that will be more helpful. So I would lead with focus and then go to depth. That’s my personal view. Given the limits you have, that’s what I would do in mathematics.

So I’m gonna pause for a minute on math before I jump into literacy, where we’ll spend a bit more time. And you also are welcome to disagree with me if I’ve gotten something terribly wrong. See, it’s good I got you late after some food. Any questions about mathematics for this year, right now, concerns? That’s “cause you’re from Texas, ma’am. [Laughter] I know she’s not. I was just trying to get another cheap shot in at Texas.

_Audience Member:_ This is a person from Pittsburgh, so _________.

_David Coleman:_ I know, I know. I was joking. I have a bad sense of humor. I will speak louder. I find that the softer I speak the less people can argue with me. [Laughter] I will speak up. I’m sorry about that. I think that this mic may not quite do it. I think if I use this mic it’s louder. Is that right? Okay, I’ll use this – the mic from now on. Anything else? Yeah.

_Audience Member:_ One of the things that struck me when you were describing year one – what I thought about is that it really will require teachers to be real experts in their subject matter.

_David Coleman:_ I’m gonna repeat just in case people didn’t hear ‘cause you didn’t have the mic in front of you. She said that as I described year one,
teachers would have to be experts in their subject matter ‘cause they’re really gonna be spending more time on fewer things. I’m gonna actually say the opposite just for fun. Year one your teachers are not expert yet. I’m assuming they’ve learned nothing more. I’ve just begun as a superintendent or a leadership team to realign professional development around the focus areas, but it’s just beginning to hit. I’ve got kind of the same people I had before. I’m just being blunt. We haven’t been able to make them experts yet.

All we’re doing year one is saying, “Take time with this stuff. Around this stuff, take time. Take time examining your students. Work towards greater mastery. Do this work and do it well. It’s your absolute top priority.” They are not yet stronger.

Year two, now that you’ve invested all your professional development, focused your _______, they’ve spent much more time with these materials, now you’re ready to gradually make teachers more expert. And what’s nice is – teacher expertise is easy to say but harder to achieve, right? But at least you’re achieving it around a more focused area, so at least now you’ve cleared the field and you’re not saying be the expert equally in everything in mathematics. You’re saying be disproportionately expert at a few things that matter.

So I think we have to look for teacher expertise as an investment in year one and beginning to deliver in year two and following, just in terms of being candid.

Yeah, please?

Audience Member: You mentioned something about Singaporean math and Hong Kong math as the leading successful in terms of mathematics. Do you say the same thing for Japanese mathematics as well?

David Coleman: You know, there’s some very interesting on Japan, which I’m not expert, but around – you know, there’s some wonderful research around kind of – both actually separately done in Japan, and some work actually in China, which of course are very different places but a similar practice around elementary school teachers doing relatively deep learning work around these core areas of arithmetic that looks very promising. And a lot of people ask us about Singapore math, for example, because there is a product with that name. I’m not ready yet, nor will we likely ever at Student Achievement Partners kind of say, “Look at this, this is a good product,” yet. We’re letting the market unfold, and I think every
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product we’ve seen could use this focus and attempt. And I think that there’s
 gonna be some very interesting work over the next few years as math focuses on
what matters to find what international examples are most lively.

Audience Member: Thank you.

David Coleman: Literacy? Everyone’s like, “He better get going to literacy
‘cause we’ve got to go home.” [Laughter] Okay, literacy. I’m sure all of you know
the kind of haunting data that surrounds literacy in this country. I find the most
haunting data the NAEP data in eighth grade reading performance, because if
you look at eighth grade NAEP performance it is a table top. It has been flat for
about 40 years, during which – 40 – during which time we have doubled or tripled
educational expenditures. So in my personal judgment we have hit a wall in later
literacy. That is, we simply, despite all the work in early reading over the past
few years – which has been debated as to its impact but the most optimistic
would argue has led to some growth in fourth grade reading and some greater
command. Eighth grade reading scores have remained absolutely flat. And I
don’t think I need to argue with you or discuss with you how devastating that is,
because if a student can’t read past the eighth grade level they’re obviously
doomed in terms of career and college readiness and all we hoped for them.

So I want you to look at the core standards for a moment as a battering ram, as
an engine to take down that wall. That was our core design principle in thinking
about them. So how do they attempt to do that? And then I’m gonna talk to you
about some of their limits, what they haven’t fixed and some more depths, and
then I want to again talk about the two or three things you can do about it this
year and next year.

So in the core standards, the first major shift in instruction is a focus on reading
to build knowledge in both elementary school and after it. So what’s most
shocking about elementary school in this country for many people is
overwhelmingly what students read in K-5 today is stories. There is data that
only 7 to 15 percent of what students now read during elementary school is
informational text. Informational text is not a beautiful work, like reading like a
detective for example, but informational text in this case has a lot of beauty in it
because it includes reading about science, history, the arts. It is everything that
is non-literary in that sense. Everything – now of course literature has its own
knowledge, and through the contributions of Massachusetts and other states – I
love the K-5 literature standards and think they explore carefully the structure of
stories and of mythology and other – and poetry and drama in a wonderful way.
But that is not enough. The data is overwhelming that – from kids from various backgrounds especially, that the knowledge that they gain in kindergarten through fifth grade, as well as the – including pre-K, by the way – the knowledge that attends on them, including the vocabulary closely related to them, is absolutely essential for reading more complex texts going forward. So the big shift in the Common Core standards is it demands that 50 percent of the work of elementary schools is based on informational text, on learning about the world.

And when you look at the kind of unintended consequences of standards and assessments, what happened, as you know, is we only tested reading and writing in the elementary school, or reading, and – reading and math, to be precise. And since then reading only was reading literature, everyone expanded the literacy blocks, right? So in other words, schools – how many people in this room have extended literacy blocks to ensure their students read at a young age? Most, right? If during that time they’re reading mostly literature or overwhelmingly so, what have you done? You’ve, by extending the literacy portion, banished history and science from the elementary school.

What is most exciting for elementary school teachers about these standards is that they recall, they re-inaugurate elementary school teachers’ rightful role as guides to the world. It is a change in their job description to say, “It is right and just that you bring your students into a world of knowledge during the years they are in your care.” And it is crucial that they do so, that that knowledge is built in a coherent way within grades as well as across grades. And there’s an example of this in the standards in the text on the human body in a sample succession of texts.

That extends through later grades in the fact that these standards are not only standards for English/Language Arts, but standards also for literacy in history and social studies as well as science and technical subjects. And that’s an area where IFL have felt has been a voice – you could say in the wilderness, if you had a biblical cast of mind for quite – many years. It’s not like this is a new idea to this crowd, that we should read and write across the curriculum, but this is the first body of academic standards that makes it a requirement equally for students and teachers. I am sick of people, to be rather frank with you, who tell me that art teachers don’t want to teach this, ‘cause our kids have to be able to do it, period, for their success. And what’s interesting about the standards is rather than saying to social studies and history teachers that they should become reading teachers, which I think is a losing game, it says instead they must – they must – enable their students to evaluate and analyze primary and secondary sources. Science teachers must not become literary teachers. What they must
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become is teachers who enable their students to read primary sources of the sort
of direct experimental results as well as reference documents to build their
knowledge of science. But what is not allowed is a content teacher to think that if
they just tell their students enough content and their students have no
independent capacity to analyze and build that content knowledge, that they are
a success. Clear?

So the second principle behind building knowledge is that content area teachers
are absolutely responsible for the academic literacy of their students. I think this
is particularly important for you in middle school. If you do not get your middle
school teachers on board with getting their students truly ready to read
increasingly more complex scientific and historical texts, you are doomed to
failure. I’m just kind of telling you. I think the data is rather clear. When students
reach high school without those capacities there’s almost no high school we’ve
invented that can repair the harm. So we’ve got to do it, okay? So think – so in
terms of year one plans, that will figure prominently.

The second shift in reading is reading and writing based on evidence. And
Lauren beautifully described the notion of reading based on evidence, that is
reading like a detective, the respect and reverence that demands that the text is
the first source of evidence. What we’ve found striking is we looked at instruction
– actually, and I don’t mean this just ‘cause of my joking tonight, we looked at it in
two states. We tried to pick two states that were as similar as possible, so we
picked Vermont and Texas. [Laughter] And what we found was in those two
states there was a remarkable similarity, which is that upwards of 80 percent of
the questions that students were asked when talking about a text were
answerable without direct reference to the text in front of you. That is, they were
about it – you know, like what it connected to, what it made you think about, big
questions, small questions, all sorts of questions, but not questions that required
you to demonstrate an evidentiary command of the text, which is essential in job-
related reading but also college-related reading. So there’s a big gap.

In writing the most popular forms of writing today in the American high school are
overwhelmingly – besides texting, which is not for credit – are overwhelmingly a
narrative of either your personal opinions or what you think – excuse me, what
you feel or what you’ve experienced, so a narrative either of your experience or
your opinions. And assessments, to Lauren’s point, follow this pattern. So if you
look at the NAEP or the MCATs, there are all these weird questions on tests.
“Describe your favorite day.” These – I’m not making this up. “Who are your
heroes? Are they, like, athletes, or are they super models, or sports stars? Tell
us and why.” “What do you think of” – super models I made up. That’s just my
own obsession.  [Laughter] You know, garbage disposals, school uniforms – you
know, all this stuff – honor, right?

We are saying no, that that is not college and career ready writing, ‘cause in
college and career ready writing you either have to make an argument based on
evidence that is visible to others than yourself, or convey complex information
clearly. Narrative plays a crucial role, but as you grow older it is to support your
ability to inform or argue or make truly extraordinary, imaginative literature. But
in other words, it isn’t standalone as your pedestal for college and career
readiness.

To give you a sense of how striking the data is on this subject, in Minnesota a
group of college professors got together in what I thought was quite an
imaginative move, calling themselves Ready or Not, Writing. And they asked
students around the state to submit essays that they would deem ready or not.
They got over 90 percent narrative writing and deemed over 90 percent of it not
college ready, period. So it’s consequential, what we ask kids and teachers to
do.

The third shift in the standards is a shift of emphasis towards the complexity of
texts. What we’ve often had in reading standards, and we’ve tried our best to
avoid this in our own, is false distinctions between reading skills across grades.
So in sixth grade you understand a character’s motivation – does this sound
familiar? And in eighth grade you understand their underlying motivation.
[Laughter] Well, you know, as a New Yorker I can tell you that most people’s
motivations are underlying unless they’re mugging you, so it’s not that helpful a
distinction. What does change over time is not the skills with which you read, but
your ability to do them with more and more complex steps, with increasing depth
as those texts demand. These standards for the first time create an explicit
staircase of text complexity, because the other worrisome data we have is that
we have systematically reduced the complexity of texts in students’ hands while
the demands of college have not changed, and career. And for all those snobs
who think college is so much better than career or technical subject, the average
demand of career and technical texts is slightly higher than that of a first-year
college course, though they hover around the same level.

There’s been really exciting work in measuring text complexity. Two leaders in
figuring that out for us are David and Meredith Leban, who are over there, who
convened with help from IFL and others all the leading researchers and how you
measure this. There’s been some great works by Cometrics and other leaders
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and Tom Landar – we’re talking about all sorts of interesting work in how you measure this. But for your sakes, the really exciting thing is for the first time there’s a measure in the standards that insists that students at each level are encountering texts of adequate complexity.

Nonetheless, you could nonetheless be defeated, because the most popular instructional practice for students who are behind is to replace their core reading with leveled text at their level, right? So if you were to actually look at what your kids are being given, they are constantly matched in this seeming noble idea that you should match everything they read to where they are today, often called a proximal zone of development, et cetera.

Let me be rather clear. Leveled readers and reading at your own level has a crucial role to play for kids in terms of their vocabulary growth, their love of reading, and has a very important role, so I’m not saying kind of just get rid of it. But what I am saying is the core of instruction, if we want kids to catch up, has to be the deliberate study of sufficiently complex texts, again and – we cannot exclude students from that and expect them to magically catch up. That’s a scaffolded environment, do you get me? Where their frustration – they are expected to be frustrated. That frustration is managed. It’s part of the classroom community, and they engage repeatedly in dealing with things that are more difficult than they can handle.

One of the reasons tragically we’re seeing kids who can read at a fourth grade level then fall more and more behind, is if we just give them stuff they’re comfortable with they’ll never make it past that next level of complexity, which is the eighth grade text. Am I making sense? So what schooling has to become is the deliberate encounter of sufficiently complex texts where level of text plays an independent role; there’s also intervention and other support.

And of course there’s the attendant vocabulary of complex texts, which involves, as you know, not just domain-specific vocabulary like cell wall or amoeba, but the kinds of words that are prevalent in all complex texts, like the word prevalent itself, or hypothesis, or consequence. These words are often not helpfully highlighted or in bold on the right side of a page as you’re reading, and if teachers don’t pay attention to teaching them they’re an invisible wall which prevents students from reading anything of sufficient complexity.

Those are the three rough changes, the rough shifts. But focusing on those, I don’t mean to exclude several other critical parts of reading instruction, so let me
just clarify that. In K-2 in particular and going forward for kids who need it, a strong dose of foundational skills for those students who need it is absolutely essential, and those skills are outlined with care in the core standards. So I didn’t mean to say we can leave that stuff out all of a sudden. That systematic instruction remains essential, particularly for students who are behind or don’t get reading immediately. Practice in fluency remains essential and will be more demanding as students are reading more complex texts. Vocabulary, as you can sense from what I’m talking about, built through reading and developing knowledge from the earliest grades, is a constant obsession of reading instruction. And when I talk to you soon about reading something carefully, you’ll notice there’s a constant attention to syntax, to the structure of language in everything you’re doing.

So given what I’ve said about literacy, what would I do about it? I’m gonna give you a few quick things to do. Number one, and the biggest for year one, is to build a culture of citing evidence in the classroom when you write and speak about texts, period. That is, when students say something about a text, dare I say they might be accountable for their talk and refer to the evidence on which their statements are made? [Laughter] You’ll find this accountability is also a check on the teachers. Do you see? It works both ways. If teachers are constantly asking, “Where’s the evidence in the text for your answer?” it’s harder to ask a question which doesn’t require evidence in the text. So do you see? It’s like an interesting – it’s like, “Cool, it works both ways,” right? It works in science. It works in history. It works in social studies. So I would do a campaign around evidence-supported answers in your districts this year, period. Does that make sense? I mean it as the simplest of fundamental shifts, honoring evidence.

Other things I would do this year – so one is the focus on evidence. So I would look for 20 percent – we said today – I would love you to do your own survey. So walk around the classrooms and see what percentage of classes have questions have text-dependent questions when they study a piece of literature, history, science, where kids need to read the text in front of them to answer. My aim is to get to 80 percent, and I would expect that you’ll be in 20 to 30 if you’re lucky. So that’s a year one shift.

The second shift of course is the texts students are reading. So in year one what you’re trying to do is get more informational text into the elementary school, okay? There are various curricula, but I’m not yet ready to recommend and just say go to one. It’s like mathematics. It will take time for coherent curricula to develop in the early years. But for now, flooding the zone with knowledge in K-5 is not a bad move. Do you see what I’m saying? Just developing a much more
balanced sense of the role of knowledge-based reading as well as literary reading in K-5.

In sixth through twelfth grade I would challenge my science, history, and ELA teachers in the following way: Pick at least three texts — I’m being really careful here — that are worthy of careful reading, and gain as much knowledge and insight as you can from those texts with your students. So when you say history teachers are teaching, I want to be very clear what I mean, ’cause history teachers or social studies teachers say, “We already have texts in our classroom. We have the textbook. We have other texts.” But let me give you an example classroom. If you are teaching Madison’s Federalist Paper 51 and you’re a history teacher, and you say, “We’re gonna discuss today what are the three things about faction you really need to know,” and you give them those things, and you’ve got the text, you quote it every now and then, that is not gaining knowledge through reading, right? ‘Cause you can talk a lot about faction. We all got a lot of faction. But that is not the same as reading Madison to find — if you instead handed out a single page of Federalist Paper 51 and said, “Based on this text and this text alone, what can you discern Madison means or does not mean by faction?” then you are reading. Am I being clear? That’s what I mean by a text-dependent question, where there’s no answer but looking closer at the text in front of you.

I’m saying for science and history teachers, they choose at least three sources to examine with that kind of care. And English/Language Arts, they should choose some combination of literature like that, and also what we call in the standards literary non-fiction. Literary non-fiction is non-fiction written for a broad audience, and here I don’t mainly mean memoir or autobiography or biography, even though that is literary non-fiction. I mean literary non-fiction in the standards is about literary non-fiction that conveys information or an argument, like the founding documents of this country, the Gettysburg Address — that’s actually not a founding document but in response to them — but the Declaration, the Preamble to the Constitution, and then the great conversation that unfolds after them, the Gettysburg Address, the Letter from Birmingham Jail, et cetera, et cetera — For Freedom speech. That’s a vibrant source of text that this country has that has its rightful role in the ELA as well as the history classroom, ’cause perhaps in no American writing is there a finer fusing of thought and word than in those writings, and hence they are very worthy of an English/Language Arts teacher’s attention. So that would be the second thing I would do, is infuse the curriculum with those texts and challenge those teachers.
So I want to give you an example of how I would align – I’m gonna enter a dark territory here, because it’s controversial, but I figure you already probably dislike me, so why not just go a little bit further? How many of you are working on teacher evaluation at the same time as you’re working on these standards? [Laughter] That’s really fun, right, to evaluate your teachers on the last set of standards while you’re trying to inaugurate a new set of standards before the measures are really viable and hold them accountable today? It’s a really very smart system we’ve developed.

I want to try to cut through it. I’m gonna say something kind of controversial. I think there are two sets of phrases in teacher evaluation that are kind of dead-on-arrival. What I mean by that is they seem to have meaning but they don’t anymore. One is “use data to inform instruction.” Like, thank you so very much for that insight. I think your teachers are looking back at you when you say this and they’re like, “Whatever.” It is, like, no gas in the car unless we are much more specific.

The second vacuous statement is “plan, engage, revise,” like you know, these categories for these teacher evaluation ______. It’s like, please help me. Have a clear objective, blah, blah, blah – you know what I mean? If there is anyone who can prove that has led to better teaching I would invite it, but imagine how deadly it is to your average teacher to hear these kind of vague phrases thrown at them.

So I’m gonna throw at you instead in literacy five questions you could ask as a part of teacher observation that might actually not be reductive and stupid. [Laughter] This is controversial territory to wade into, but I think it’s kind of interesting, ‘cause you’re doing it. Why not make it productive?

Number one: Is there a text or texts under discussion? And if there are, are they of a sufficiently high quality and complexity? Period. I think you would be surprised to see how many classrooms the answer is no to the first part of the question. It’s very hard to teach people to read better when there’s no text under discussion. Number one: Is there a text under discussion, and what is its complexity or quality?

Number two: What are the quality of the questions asked about the text? Are they text-dependent? Are they coherent? Are they worth answering? Do they encourage students to attend to what’s interesting or specific in this text? Two.
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Number three: Is there evidence of students drawing from the text in their speaking and writing?

Number four: From how diverse a set of students is that evidence available? That is, is there evidence not just some but all students are speaking and writing using evidence from the text? And don’t only look at – please – who you see talking in a classroom or their apparent engagement, because when you teach like this, really focused on evidence within a text, there are moments of highly productive frustration and silence where a student might be rethinking and wondering and highly engaged but keeping their mouth shut. But you do want to see it emerge in their writing, of course, if they’re not speaking about it.

Number five: What is the quality of teacher feedback, of the feedback students receive on that work that we’ve gathered and its growth?

To me that is a much more exciting set of criteria to engage with a literacy teacher about than, “Did you have a plan? How were your objectives? Were your students engaged?” Who can determine these things? The things I just described to you are countable. That is, in the best meaning of accountable, they are literally things you can count. And so I’d ask you to think about literacy in this way. While literacy seems like the most mysterious and vague and kind of touchy-feely of our disciplines, I think it can be much improved by daring to count within literacy, and by daring to observe the accumulation of these kinds of facts. Does that make sense as a beginning?

In the second year of literacy, what I’m hoping is that we will have developed, and others together with us, a much finer set of exemplars for your teachers to use. We are already open-source publishing a set of exemplars of looking at fewer texts more carefully, just like in math. There’s a real slowdown in literacy. If you’re gonna work on more complex texts, you have to slow down. Our model of the Gettysburg Address recommends three to five days of instruction on those three short paragraphs; on the Letter from Birmingham Jail, at least two weeks to carefully analyze that remarkable argument and its shape. That’s before you go on to additional sources and making comparisons and synthetic moves. I’m reminded by my friend Tony, this is part of instruction, these exemplars. They’re not showing the whole range of it. But part of the work has to shift to reading short things worth of rereading with care to build a culture of this kind of reexamination. Am I making sense? So you should see teachers beginning to do that work.
It is near time for us to conclude. I had another kind of treat, but I’m kind of saved by not having to do with it, but I’m gonna outline it for you, which is I have two poems to share which are “One Art” by Elizabeth Bishop and “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night” by Dylan Thomas. And for those of you who want to talk about them, I advise – and, Matt, where’d you put that? Did I – I was gonna – I have some –

Lauren Resnick: What are you looking for?

David Coleman: Do you have them? You have the documents, but I have something even better. What? Is it under my chair? Oh, thank you. So rather than doing what I was going to do – I’ll tell you a little bit what I was going to do [Laughter], which is that – how many people in this very educated audience who have so much more qualifications than I do – how many of you know the derivation of the word “symposium”? I’m giving you a hint.

To me a great example of how far the academy has fallen from Ancient Greece is the demeaning of the word “symposium,” ‘cause what symposium used to mean in the good old days is to drink together, [Laughter] “sum” meaning together, and “posea” meaning to drink.

So for those of you who want in the bar later to spend some time with these two remarkable things we won’t have time to do together now, I’m gonna leave you with a couple of questions about them. What are three things you find similar about these poems, and what are one or two that you find different? Why is Dylan Thomas in the first line of “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night” – why doesn’t he say gently instead of gentle, ‘cause he’s talking about you going, isn’t he? Shouldn’t it be an adverb? Did he make, like, a simple grammatical error in his finest poem? Why is the bay green? It’s the only color in the poem. What’s the difference in tone between these two poems? How do they address their obvious shared topic of loss in very different tones? What does Elizabeth Bishop mean by her joking voice?

There’s so much to talk about that we don’t have time to, and I’m gonna allow you to escape. But I hope as you walked into classrooms embracing the core you’d begin to see teachers and students addressing questions of that humility and intensity about texts that matter. And with that, good night. Thank you.

Rosita Apodaca: David, will you –
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David Coleman: I can’t take this on the plane, so for anyone who wants some bourbon it is here for you. [Laughter]

Rosita Apodaca: David, will you entertain a question if there’s one on the floor?

David Coleman: Of course.

Rosita Apodaca: Okay. Any burning questions before we close? Oh, come on. Yes, sir. This is Prince George’s County. [Laughter]

David Coleman: The much-forgotten district.

Audience Member: So I actually had a question for you in June but I’ve since answered it. But I wanted to share the insight. I heard you do Gettysburg Address and you dove right into it, and my question was gonna be in unit planning. What is the scaffolding to get to Gettysburg address? But I had the opportunity to work with a class and they answered the question. You don’t need the scaffolding, that you jump right into the high-level questioning and the kids naturally fall into that, without this sense of we have to build it from the bottom up, that you could dive right in. So thanks for not answering my question back in June.

David Coleman: I’m very moved by that, yeah.

Rosita Apodaca: Thanks a lot, David.

David Coleman: I’ll just say a word about that. This is a very contentious and complicated issue, which is the question of how much preparatory work do you need to do. And I provocatively in the one moment I had at the end threw these two poems at you without a short biography of Elizabeth or Dylan Thomas, and without much about these poems, because to introduce them is to speak first. And in my view most authors lavish a great deal of time on the way they begin and I am hesitant to interfere with their attempt to set the table. And what the gentleman just described is very difficult test, the Gettysburg Address. We’ve refrained thus far from offering the obvious contextual background you could to let students first experience its words and worry about them and wrestle with
them. And that requires that you suffer some frustration and disorientation, and
the question is do we want to insulate students from that or practice them in it?
Because I think good readers experience this constantly and wrestle with it, and
then gradually as they get the most they can from a text, do turn to other
sources, et cetera. But part of this is if just you knew – I just have to tell you, the
amount of time spent pre-teaching and pre-reading would stun you. It’s like in
textbooks there’s like 20 pages of pre-reading material before you even get to the
text in front of you. So it’s something to watch out for. Yeah?

Audience Member: I have to say I think I agree that we don’t scaffold, but I’m not
really sure I can say we don’t scaffold at all.

David Coleman: No –

Audience Member: We scaffold differently, and I think that Dr. Arbugast made a
good point. You don’t build all that background over and over again _____ the
students can do it. You get _______ into the text, and it is through the class
discussion that percolates up from the students to begin to get scaffold. It’s
natural and authentic.

David Coleman: I wish we could do these two poems together, ‘cause I so
agree with you. Do you learn phrases like stanza or rhyme before you start, or
do they emerge as necessary as part of the discussion? But I think the big idea
here is to allow the scaffolds to come as needed to understand this thing. When
you try to give scaffolds independent of it, either in the form of the knowledge you
need in advance, or reading skills like the 90th lesson on cause and effect –
which kids do not need, right? They know if you hit someone it hurts them.
That’s cause, that’s effect. That’s not the problem. [Laughter] So it really is a lot
of scaffolding because you’re reading together much more slowly.

I want to be clear about this word scaffolding, ‘cause there’s a ton of it. Every
question you’re asking, every time you’re interpreting a particular sentence
together, you’re scaffolding that discussion. You’re scaffolding to a discussion of
syntax, of vocabulary, of terminology. You’re just choosing to do it in the context
of reading something worth reading.

Rosita Apodaca: David, just in closing could you just say just one or two
sentences about English language learners?
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David Coleman: I think we were just talking about them, because this is where the anxiety rests with us most. So let me very blunt about all this with English language learners.

Rosita Apodaca: Go ahead.

David Coleman: I believe there must be a Bill of Rights for English language learners in this country, so I’m not gonna talk to you about what you expect me to talk about first, which is the accommodations we must make for English language learners. I think the first thing we need to do is say they have a right to sufficiently complex text. I was with the leading publisher of ELL materials for history and social studies, and do you know what they said to me, like not fooling said to me? “We publish mainly picture books and low-level texts for these students. Are you saying that has to change?” And I was like, “Yeah.” [Laughter]

Second, they have a right to be equal before the text. That is, when I talk about all the evidence being before you and reading like a detective, I think this is a civil rights issue for these students, that they are brought into the conversation as equal partners to interpret that. It’s not a way of excluding anybody from the conversation. It’s a way of saying you’re all equal to it.

Third – anyway, we could talk about this. They have a right to talk about academic subjects with evidence rather than constantly being asked about their own experience, which is a way, perhaps, of entertaining their adult teachers, but not of advancing their academic learning, if I may be so preposterous to say so.

So I think we need a shift and am willing to make enemies to do so, ’cause I think these kids are being poorly served. However, there’s a body of excellent practitioners in the English language learner community that has long been advocating for sufficient complexity, for – and there’s a lot of scaffolding. The debate we’re having – a lively one – is how much happens upfront versus how much can happen within the text. And from every text you’re trying to build as much knowledge as possible. Remember when I talked about elementary school reading more knowledge-based text? And by reading Gettysburg this way you learn a lot from Lincoln about what’s going on. So I love knowledge, and I love background knowledge as a strength to further reading. I just don’t want to eclipse the reading of each new text by piling it on in advance.
So what I’m trying to talk to you about in terms of scaffolding is be careful that scaffolding resembles the experiences these students will have. For example, if you say before English language learners read a text they need to watch a movie and then do this and all this other stuff, what happens on the exam? You’ve just created a very high stakes moment for that child, ‘cause they’ve never practiced reading it – do you see what you’ve done to them? The exam becomes their super high stakes moment of delivering a performance they’ve never delivered, ‘cause you’ve never cultivated that. You’ve never said, “First, how much evidence can you get from here? I know it’s disorienting. Tell me what you can get,” and then build from there.

So we’re in deep discussions with the leaders of ELL learning and it’s very exciting. But I will tell you I think we need rights as well as accommodation, and we need a bolder view if we’re gonna transform the performance of these kids. Thank you so much.

Rosita Apodaca: Thank you very much, David. Thank you so much. You were very interesting and inspiring.

[End of Audio]