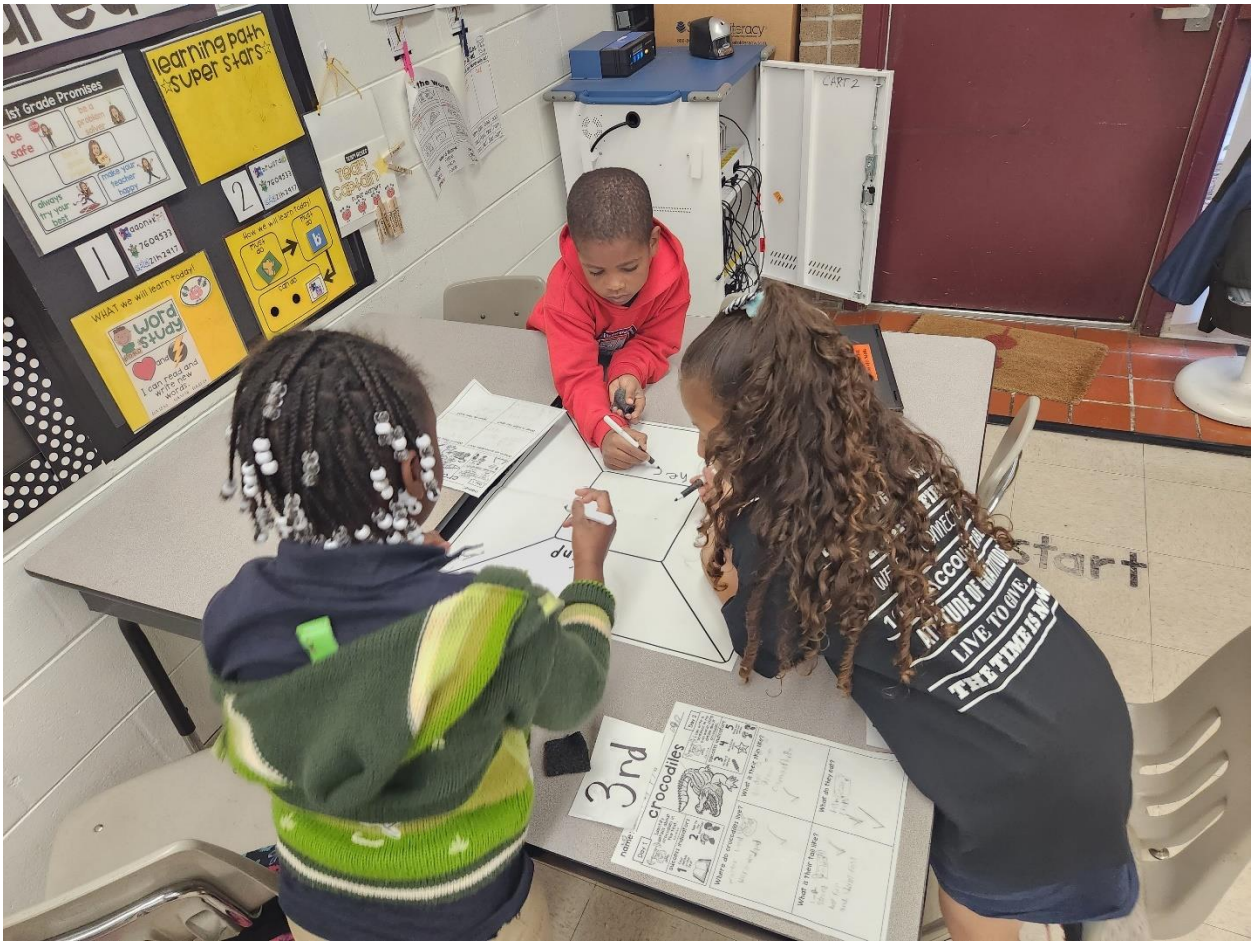
Deeper Learning for Title 1 Schools



Students engaged in deeper learning at Shaw Elementary, a Title 1 school in Tampa, Florida.

By: Michael D. Toth

Every Title 1 School Can Become Great

When I visit Title 1 schools, I see students brimming with developable talent and full of rich cultural capital and unique perspectives and experiences. The research also supports that all students bring these assets (Menzies et al., 2024).

Within Title 1 schools lies the promise of an uplifting public education system that elevates students out of the cycle of poverty…but only if the focus changes to redesigned, rigorous Tier 1 instruction that ensures deeper learning for *all* students.

What Is Deeper Learning?

Instructional Empowerment defines deeper learning as *all* students developing into leaders of their own learning. They collaborate in teams, engage in rich discourse, and tackle rigorous tasks that prepare them for both academic and real-world success.

The Power of Deeper Learning for Title 1 Schools

Title 1 schools are unique due to the student populations they serve. Educators are unsung heroes in these schools serving:

- Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds
- Higher populations of Black, Hispanic, and Native American students
- Higher rates of students diagnosed with learning disabilities
- More English learners
- Students that often experience higher mobility

Deeper learning—if implemented correctly—has the power to transform learning environments and raise the proficiency of all students, with the greatest benefits for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Noguera et al., 2017; Zeiser et al., 2014).

Deeper learning should not be only the domain of schools that serve wealthier communities or gated for students in honors or advanced placement courses (Mehta & Fine, 2017).

In fact, deeper learning is *best* suited for Title 1 schools. It offers a greater return on investment in situations of limited funding by addressing the root causes of:

- Low student achievement
- Challenging student behavior
- Chronic absenteeism
- Decreased student engagement
- Teacher turnover

Deeper learning can transform Title 1 classrooms into thriving learning environments with rich and rigorous instruction that rapidly raises achievement for all students.

Numerous research studies have verified this result (Bitter et al., 2014; Zeiser et al., 2022). Our own Applied Research Center studies show learning gains in the very first year of implementation with accelerated achievement gains in subsequent years (Basileo, 2019).

Yet, we rarely see deeper learning as the main option that Title 1 schools anchor their improvement goals around (Noguera et al., 2017).

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Why Title 1 Schools Need Deeper Learning Now More Than Ever

In an era of threatened reductions in federal title 1 funds, it is more critical than ever to reassess how funds are being invested and whether those investments are yielding significant return on investment in terms of rigorous learning, authentic engagement, and gains in academic proficiency.

Title 1 Schools at Crossroads

Title 1 schools are at a crossroads. Since the pandemic, schools have utilized federal relief funds to purchase programs to improve student academic performance, as well as interventions to remediate academic and behavioral skills (Edunomics Lab, 2023). They have also attempted to address low student performance by adopting new, more rigorous curricula.

Nevertheless, the recently released National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results show a disheartening lack of progress in recovering from learning losses since the pandemic along with alarmingly widened achievement gaps (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d).

Are Programs and Interventions Working? What the Research Says

According to extensive research, the huge investment that Title 1 schools have made in more programs and interventions has not materialized into the hoped for learning gains.

Instead, what many Title 1 schools are seeing is:

- Principals and teachers exhibiting **fatigue and burnout** from frequent program changes (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Dilekçi et al., 2025).
- Students' behaviors in schools remaining at **higher levels of disruption** (Lin et al., 2024; Peetz, 2025).
- Continued **high levels of student disengagement** (Hrynowski, 2024; Winthrop et al., 2025).
- Lasting rates of **higher chronic absenteeism**, with the largest increases in districts with greater percentages of students in poverty (Attendance Works, 2024; DiMarco, 2025).

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Why Traditional Approaches Fall Short: Symptoms Versus Root Causes

Often, Title 1 schools create environments of higher control through utilizing:

- Programs like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) where students' behavior is tightly monitored, and misbehavior is quickly addressed.
- Interventions with Response to Interventions (RTI) or Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) that may be complemented with additional programs and computer-based learning.

Emphasis on these programs and interventions is understandable—and at times, they are necessary to establish order and safety. But these traditional approaches treat the symptoms of low performance, not their root causes.

Treating Symptoms Exhausts Students and Educators

The result of treating symptoms with programs and interventions is not high student academic proficiency—rather, it is exhausted, burned-out educators and disengaged students (Dilekçi et al., 2025; Hrynowski, 2024).

Students are voting against the double dosing of interventions with their disengagement, misbehavior, and lack of attendance—all of which remain at historic highs (DiMarco, 2025; Hrynowski, 2024; Peetz, 2025).

Double dosing students with interventions is not having the desired result of increasing proficiency.

The Root Cause: Tier 1 Instruction

Over emphasis on behavioral and academic interventions is too often coupled with Tier 1 instruction that is lower rigor and heavily teacher-centered. This results in ritualistic compliance of students with little voice or choice in their learning process.

Tier 1 instruction—teaching of academic knowledge and skills that all students need to master—is often watered down below the level of the standards in the mistaken belief that students in Title 1 schools lack the capacity for rigorous learning. The absence of deeper learning in Title 1 schools is the heart of the issue.

The weaker the Tier 1 instruction, the more students will be referred to interventions. Eventually, the RTI pyramid goes upside down with the majority of students in some form of interventions (see figure 1).

We cannot control and intervention our way to academic proficiency. We must go beyond treating symptoms and invest in redesigned, rigorous and engaging Tier 1 instruction to achieve deeper learning for *all* students.

Figure 1. Lower rigor instruction with an absence of deeper learning results in the upside-down RTI/MTSS pyramid with most students in some form of remediation or interventions.

The Fallacy of Teacher-Centered Instruction

My colleagues and I walk thousands of Title 1 classrooms every year during RigorWalks that measure rigor and engagement in Tier 1 instruction. What we find is **teachers working too hard and students being too passive as dependent learners**.

Teachers working harder than their students is the effect of the legacy instructional model of teacher-centered instruction. That model is not working for today's student populations who have been raised with unfettered access to digital technologies.

Traditional teacher-centered instruction was never designed to develop students into independent critical thinkers (Mehta, 2022). To be clear, the issue is not the teachers. They are teaching as they have been taught to teach (Cuban, 1984; Mehta & Fine, 2017). Teachers need to be empowered with a different model of instruction developed for the needs of today's learners.

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A Legacy Model That Creates Dependent Learners

Teachers are heroes who come into this profession to make a difference in children's lives (Heinz, 2015; Moosa, 2020; Uygun & Karakaş, 2023). However, they are then trained in the legacy pedagogy of teacher-centered instruction similar to what they experienced in their own K-12 education (Cuban, 1984).

Teacher-centered instruction is characterized by:

- The teacher's voice being dominant throughout the lesson

- Students quietly listening to the teacher
- The teacher prompting students throughout the lesson activities
- Little voice or choice for students in the learning process (Patall, 2024).

This classroom environment creates dependent learners.

Shifting Title 1 Classrooms to Deeper Learning

To shift away from the legacy teacher-centered model, Title 1 schools need a clear understanding of how deeper learning can work for all of their students.

Deeper learning is not a collection of "deeper learning strategies" that is overlaid on existing teacher-centered instruction. Deeper learning requires a research-based pedagogy to create a classroom experience where students acquire and master academic knowledge through the application of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills (National Research Council, 2012).

This deeper learning pedagogy helps teachers and their students transition from teacher-directed instruction with passive and dependent learning to engaging team-based learning with higher rigor tasks. Teachers are able to release more of the learning process to students through team structures.

Researchers at our Applied Research Center spent decades analyzing pedagogy in thousands of classrooms to develop a model for deeper learning pedagogy.

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The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning

Our research-based Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning™ specializes in transitioning traditional classrooms to deeper learning environments in a step-by-step process. This process scales successfully to all teachers, classrooms, and students—regardless of the affluence or poverty of the communities the school serves.

As classrooms transition to our model for deeper learning, our longitudinal studies have revealed that learning gains accelerate for *all* students including all reporting categories:

- Students with disabilities
- English learners
- Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds

Why the Model Works for Title 1 Schools

Title 1 schools are tasked with refining their students' raw, developable talents and building the capacity within their students to be successful academically and in life beyond school. What makes our model different is that it transforms *all* students into **expert learners**.

How?

- **Provides Classroom Resources and Structures:** The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning provides classroom resources and step-by-step guides and videos for implementing the teaming structures. Resources include student role cards, agree/disagree cards with discussion starter stems, team norms, and protocols for teams to self-manage their own learning.

- **Makes Rigorous Discourse Possible for All, Closing Achievement Gaps:** The key to the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning is providing team-based structures for *all* students to successfully engage in rigorous tasks and vibrant discourse on the content. The level of learning is directly proportionate to the level of student discourse. Our model focuses on supporting all students to engage in critical thinking and reasoning discourse on the content.

- **Develops Students' Foundational Skills:** The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning does *not* assume students already have self-regulation, impulse control, and other skills to work in student-led teams. Instead, the model develops these skills by establishing classroom routines with research-based resources and practices that students (and teachers) quickly master for deeper learning. This purposefully builds the capacity within students to be more effective learners.

- **Supports All Students to Build Advanced Skills for Deeper Learning:** Building on the foundation of self-managed learning teams and respectful discourse, students then advance their critical thinking and reasoning skills. As students master deeper learning skills in their team, they gain more confidence, persistence, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and empathy for each other. The teams soon form a student-owned learning culture that ensures ALL members are giving their full effort and reaching their maximum potential. This builds the capacity within *all* students to become expert learners.

Story from a Partner School: Student Who Was Disengaged and Absent Begins Developing into a Deeper Learner

Dr. Angela Holt is the Director of Curriculum and Instruction at Woonsocket Education Department in Rhode Island. Her district partnered with Instructional Empowerment to implement the **Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning**. Dr. Holt shared the positive changes she saw in a student who had been disengaged and often absent from school. The school in this anecdote is in the beginning stages of the journey to deeper learning and already seeing promising student outcomes.

"We've had the joy of being able to watch some of our high school students thrive with intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. One of the things that has been most exciting is we asked some of our high school students to talk about their experience with the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning.

One of our students, a junior in high school, told us that when he had the opportunity to share his thoughts and to talk with his peers in school, he was able to engage in content that he has never been able to do before. He is able to learn and apply his learning and think about learning in a way that he has never been able to do.

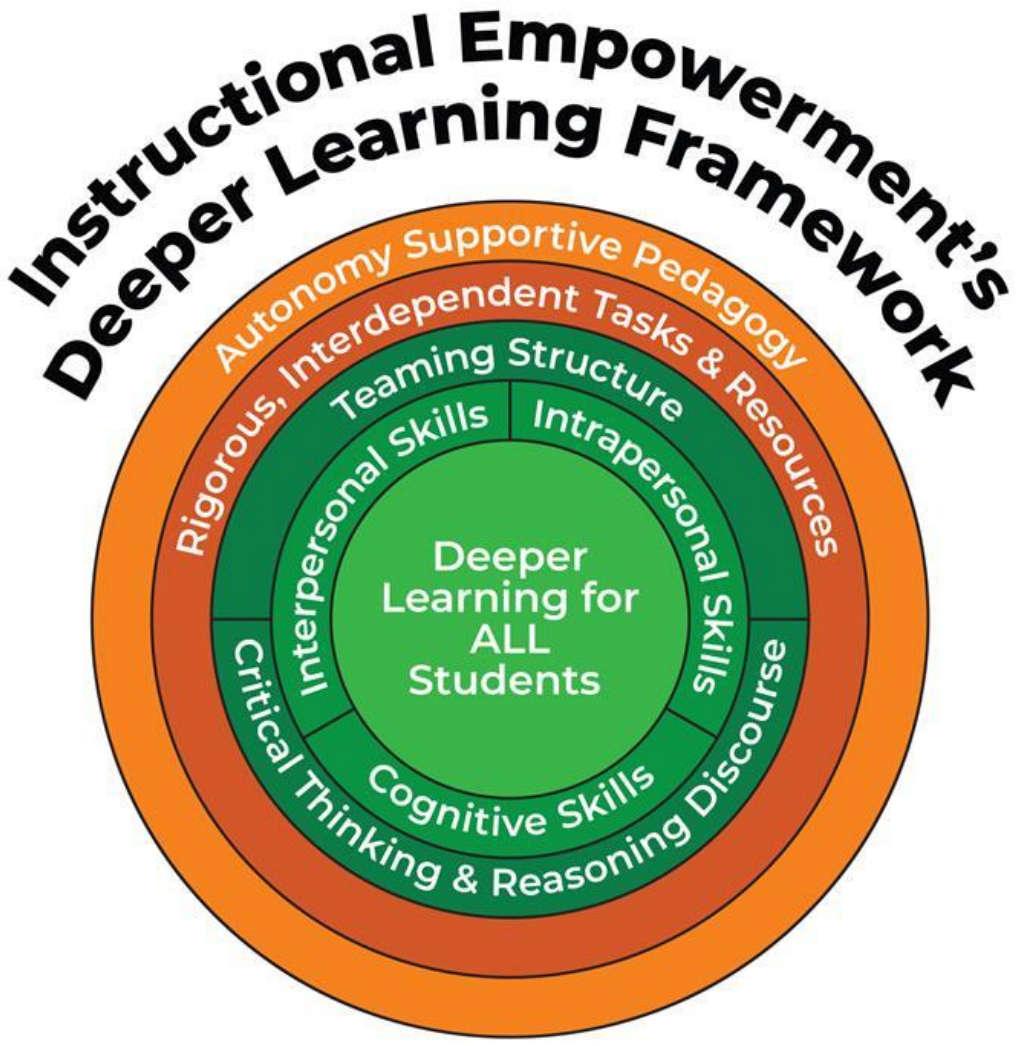
He is a student who doesn't come to school at times. When he comes to school, he maybe puts his hood on. He might not always listen. But he said when he was given the opportunity to talk to his friends in school about what they were learning, he actually wanted to do that. It wasn't just reading a book. It wasn't just writing on paper. He actually got to talk with people. And it changed his mind about school."

– Angela Holt, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Woonsocket Education Department

[**Read the case study:** Woonsocket Education Department Boosts Student Engagement and Achievement Through Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning]

The Deeper Learning Framework

Title 1 schools exploring deeper learning may want to understand its underlying framework. Instructional Empowerment's Deeper Learning Framework shows the relationships of the key competencies necessary to achieve deeper learning and raise academic achievement for *all* students.



Learn more about each competency in our framework for deeper learning.

Investing Title 1 Funds Differently to Get Different Results

Funding more programs will do little more than give the small bumps in achievement that schools have experienced in the past—without the sustainable capacity building and dramatic learning gains that are possible for *all* students.

Title 1 funds often focus on programs and interventions. However, shifting the emphasis to a research-based model of deeper learning in Tier 1 instruction offers a stronger return on investment. This approach focuses on building the capacity of every student to become a better learner. As a result, it generates learning and proficiency gains year after year (Zeiser et al., 2014).

About the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning

There has always been deeper learning for *some* students – but not for *all* students in every classroom, every day. Now it is possible with the research-based Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning™, which provides every teacher and all students with the professional learning, support, and resources to achieve deeper, more rigorous learning of the curriculum.

The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning places students at the center of their learning, shifting from traditional teacher-directed methods to student-led team learning. In this approach, students collaborate in structured, interdependent teams, guided by clear roles and responsibilities. Unlike traditional grouping, this approach ensures equal participation and accountability – fostering deeper understanding, critical thinking, and collaboration.

About the Author

Michael D. Toth is founder and CEO of Instructional Empowerment (IE) and leads IE's Applied Research Center. He is also the author of the multi-award-winning book *The Power of Student Teams* with David Sousa; author of *Who Moved My Standards*; and co-author with Robert Marzano of multiple books. Most recently, he co-authored peer-reviewed research articles published in academic journals in collaboration with researchers Lindsey Devers Basileo, Merewyn Lyons, Barbara Otto, and Natalie Vannini.

Michael is a keynote speaker at conferences and coaches superintendents on creating a bold instructional vision, designing and launching a high-functioning cabinet team, transforming Tier 1 core instruction, and leading systems-based school advancement.

Learn more about Michael: https://instructionalempowerment.com/ie-founder-michael-d-toth/

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