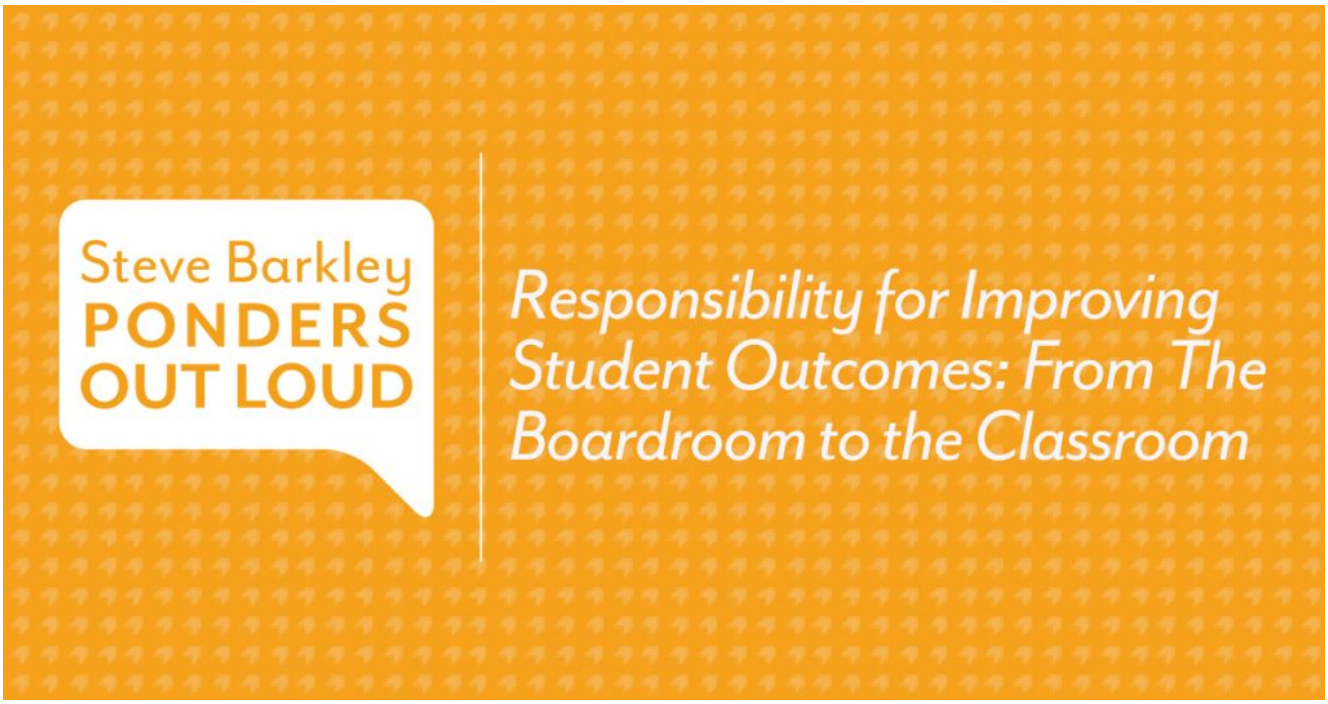
Podcast: Responsibility for Improving Student Outcomes – From The Boardroom to the Classroom



AJ Crabill, the director of governance for the Council of Great City Schools and the conservator for Desoto ISD in Texas, explores the need for district alignment on continuous improvement in student learning outcomes. These statements from AJ spark the conversation: *"The sole reason that schools exist is to improve student outcomes"* and *"Student outcomes don't change until adult behaviors change."*

Visit AJ's website here.

Find AJ's book, "Great on Their Behalf" here.

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PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Steve: 00:01 Hello, and welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud Podcast. Instructional coaches and leaders create the environment that supports teachers to continually imagine, grow and achieve. They model an excitement for learning that teachers in turn model for students. This podcast is dedicated to promoting the important aspects of instructional leadership. Thanks for listening. I'm thrilled you're here.

Steve: 00:34 Responsibility for improving student outcomes from the boardroom to the classroom. Our podcast guest today is AJ Crabill, who serves as the Director of Governance for the Council of Great City Schools, and the conservator for the DeSoto ISD system in Texas. Under his leadership, DeSoto ISD has made substantial improvements in many areas. In addition, AJ is the author of "Great on Their Behalf: Why School Boards Fail, How Yours Can Become Effective."

Steve: 01:08 Welcome, AJ.

AJ: 01:12 Hey, thanks so much for having me. It's good to be with you, Steve.

Steve: 01:15 Well, thanks. I I visited your website and I listened to some interviews and I pulled a couple of statements that I found that I thought might give us a good starting point. So I'll play back the statement to you and you expand on it.

AJ: 01:32 Sounds good.

Steve: 01:32 The first one is, the sole reasons that school systems exist is to improve student outcomes.

AJ: 01:40 Yeah. This idea that the reason school systems exist is to cause improvements in what children know and are able to do. The basic concept here is that when our young people leave the school system, they don't get to take anything else with them. That's it. What they get to take is what they know and

are able to do. We don't let them take the laptops with them. It's not like you can grab your favorite teacher, sling them over your shoulders, like "you're coming with me bub." When you leave, what you leave with is what do I know and what am I able to do? And so school systems then have to figure out what are the things that students know and are able to do that's going to most set them up to live a choice filled life where they can really pursue the things that are of meaning to them, ideally in a way that allows 'em to be able to take care of themselves and their families.

AJ: 02:31 That's the core function that school systems play. This is an important distinction though, because it becomes so easy to see all the other things that a school system does that those are in fact the reason the school system exists. But that's simply not the case. School systems don't exist to serve school lunch. School systems don't exist to have elaborate football stadiums. Even the things that seem closer in – school systems don't exist to have great textbooks. School systems don't exist to have great teachers. All of these are essential ingredients to really setting students up for success but none of these are why the school system exists. And so if you're going to engage in continuous improvement, for that to be effective, it really has to start with being clear about what is it that we're here to accomplish in the first place? School systems exist for one reason, one reason only, and that's to improve student outcomes, to cause improvements what students know and are able to do.

Steve: 03:30 So all those other things, while they have some role to play, we really need to be able to trace that they're having an impact.

AJ: 03:41 Their impact on why we're here. And so if we have the textbook that all of the adults love, but the instructional materials aren't actually helping students learn, then that's not the textbook that we need. Even if the

food services program that all of the adults love, but none of the children to eaten any of the food, that's probably not the food service program that we need. And so we're really constantly tracing back to this is our purpose. How are all of the other things in adult land contributing to making manifest that purpose?

Steve: 04:21 You're sparking a phrase that I know I've come upon a little too often when I'm trying to figure out why something exists in the way that the school is structured. And it tends to be in arranged that way for management or arranged that way for teachers.

AJ: 04:42 The reality is somebody is benefiting. And that's the core observation that I hear you lifting up, is someone is benefiting from the system as it currently exists. Sometimes we hear people say, the system is perfectly designed to produce the results it's producing. Well, someone is experiencing benefit from the current design, even if that someone doesn't happen to be the students who are supposed to be at the center of it.

Steve: 05:11 I recall one of my biggies was that students were placed in homerooms in alphabetical order. It made stuff coming out of the office in the guidance department really easy.

AJ: 05:26 That sounds perfect. That that sounds spot on.

Steve: 05:31 Let me jump to another line I pulled: "student outcomes don't change until adult behaviors change."

AJ: 05:38 Yeah. One of the things that folks miss with that idea is that what I really want people to lean into is this idea that I want there
to be absolute accountability on the part of the adults in the system for whether or not students are getting what they deserve. What I don't want is for this indulgence in externalities to be why things didn't work out for children.

So if little AJ didn't learn the things we needed him to learn for him to be set up for success in life, that I don't want us to ever say, well, that happened because little AJ just didn't wanna learn. Or that happened because little AJ is poor. Or that happened because of all of these other things that externalize accountability for our children's wellbeing from the adults in the system. And so it's not actually to suggest that none of these externalities don't exist. It's definitely not to suggest that little AJ doesn't have his own sense of agency and capacity to learn and grow or without us, it's rather to localize responsibility for what it is that we owe our children with us as the adults in the school system. And so it's not so much offered as a statement of fact as it is a statement of purpose. That student outcomes don't change until adult behaviors change starting with me, starting with my adult behaviors.

Steve: 07:12 So what does that say about educator learning as a critical element of the system?

AJ: 07:19 It suggests that what I want for my students emerges from my willingness to change my adult behavior and my ability to change my adult behavior emerges from my willingness to be on a continuous improvement process to constantly be learning, to constantly be growing and that as I am engaged in continuous improvement, I begin to expand what's possible for my students through me.

Steve: 07:45 My favorite statement when I'm working with professional learning communities in schools – that as you look at the student data or student results, the question you begin with is, what do the kids need us to learn?

AJ: 08:00 Yeah. I really, really enjoy that.

Steve: 08:06 I'm gonna make an assumption. If we knew what to do to get better results, we would've done it. I'm gonna assume nobody's holding back.

AJ: 08:14 You know what, I'm gonna save my best for the next kids to come along. Not not these kids, not these kids.

Steve: 08:23

AJ: 08:23 No, I really appreciate that. When you've offered that to folks, how do people frequently respond? Do people experience empowerment
from that or have you been beaten up?
Steve: 08:36 I get some kickback from it, but once I add that piece of what my assumption is, yeah. You know, my assumption is if you knew that having done this, it would've got a different result, you would've done it. It's not until we got the results that are in front of us that we realized the best of what we did didn't get us where we want to be.

AJ: 09:00 And that doesn't make us the villain. One of the things I hate is this trope of well, we just have lazy teachers. I don't know where people are looking. I spend a lot of time visit classrooms all over the place. I'm not seeing all these lazy teachers, but what I see is people who are working hard and they're putting it all on the field. And so I really enjoy that particular offering because it does suggest, it does honor the contribution of our educators and across the spectrum be they, in administration or in the classroom or elsewhere. It suggests that the folks are in fact, working hard enough, and that where our opportunity for improvement lies isn't in character building for teachers, but just rather in support for teachers.

Steve: 09:56 Yeah. Because of your experiences with boards and central office as well as with schools, I'm wondering, can you talk about what kind of shared focus or shared collaboration needs to exist at those three different levels in order for a system to be successful?

AJ: 10:22 Yeah. The challenge here is that imagine you're in a canoe and you've got three people in a canoe, and all three of

them are rowing as hard and as fast as they can. I mean, they are just going to work with that canoe. They are putting it all in, they've measured out exactly what depth they want the paddle going in. What's the angle of attack? They've got their form down where they're rowing with their full body and their legs, not just their arms. I mean, they're doing everything. Now, they're rowing in three different directions but they're working hard. Well, the reality is, in that moment, what causes their destination is no longer their collective behavior. It's really wherever the current of the river was gonna go.

AJ: 11:11 And they're just kind of pin wheeling around and not actually being determined in what happens in the future of their canoe. But they're working hard. And so this is the challenge of non alignment. This is essentially what you're servicing is, what is the impact of alignment? And just like in a vehicle where the wheels are out of alignment, the result is waste energy – from a mechanical perspective, the result is waste energy in the machine, which degrades performance both in real time and degrades the viability of the machine's components such that its lifespan will actually decrease. I actually think that that's probably an apt metaphor for what happens when these three different groups, your frontline educators, their support system at the building level, their support system at central office, collectively the administration and then the school board, when they're not in alignment, that you do have a lot of wasted hot air – wasted heat energy in that regard.

AJ: 12:25 Because people are talking past each other, they're not actually contributing to work being produced in the scientific perspective. But also I think the other critical thing is you are wearing down the components. And so you have folks who put in the fullness of their duties and then go home exhausted thinking, I don't think we did anything for kids today. And I've seen this be just as true for teachers in the

classrooms. I've spent all day on compliance related stuff. I don't feel like I actually got through to my kids today. I see that coming from board members. I'm leaving a board meeting after eight hour marathon session and we talked about a lot of stuff, but I can't tell you if children are any better off today, if there's been any improvements in what students know are able to do.

AJ: 13:08 And I definitely can't tell you what pivots or what adjustments we're making in how we're holding our paddle to figure out if it's actually gonna make a difference. And so that's absolutely a challenge that I see is when we have non-alignment, it not only degrades the capacity of the organization to achieve its goal and to really steer the canoe where we want it to go, but it also degrades the parts, the constituent parts, which is a business of love. This is a human endeavor. We're grading down the humans involved. And I think when you contemplate it from that perspective, it can't be that surprising that we're seeing really record levels of folks leaving the profession and saying, you know what? I just, I can't continue doing this. I think we have, as leaders in school systems, I think we have a role to play in creating education as a place where people can have an amazing and meaningful career where they don't spend all their time feeling like they're just being destroyed by the very system they're here to be a part of.

Steve: 14:12 Yeah. There's nothing more stressful than working hard and not being able to point to results. It's hard work. There's no way getting around being in education not being hard work.

AJ: 14:28 And I don't see people afraid of hard work. I do see people fearful of that hard work not being honored either through the non-alignment or through just out and out militia. But I don't experience a lot of malicious administrators and board members. I do experience teachers feeling like administrators and board members are malicious because that's

the experience they're having as the component that's being ground on through the non- alignment. But I think in the context of relationship, you'd find out everybody's working as hard as they know how and trying as hard as they know how. In the space of non-alignment, most of that energy gets disrespected and kicked out of the system as waste heat.

Steve: 15:13 Would you talk a little bit about some of the successes that DeSoto, ISD has experienced in the time that you've been there working with them and actually most interested in what you learned from it or what was reinforced for you. What did you go in there knowing and you were able to see it happe and it reinforced that for you?

AJ: 15:38 First and foremost, all the real goodness that's happened to DeSoto is because we've got just an amazing group of students and teachers who, despite hardship, have just continued to do amazing things. And so I certainly wanna take a moment to brag. Not only have we seen tremendous improvements academically over the past two years, in addition to the academic domain, our girls basketball team won state, our boys football team won state, and then just recently our high school choir teacher won a Grammy.

Steve: 16:16 Wow. So those things can go together.

AJ: 16:19 Absolutely. They apparently are all feeding into each other because we're just hitting on all cylinders. It's been a real blessing. In terms of my role in DeSoto, you know it has certainly showed up at a time when there, like a lot of school systems, there were some challenges that folks were facing. I assumed that my role was to just serve as a coach and I think that orientation continues to serve me well in terms of my ability to be effective with folks. I'm not coming in kind of being kind of this top-down authoritarian, but really trying to work with folks to identify what is it you're trying to achieve? What is it gonna take to get there and how can we create some aligned systems of monitoring and

continuous improvement so that if you're getting there that's visible, if you're not getting there, that's visible as well.

AJ: 17:11 So that's certainly been my approach from coaching perspective. In terms of what I've learned, I definitely did not put enough investment into relationships with our teachers when I first arrived. And I know what my excuse was, but my excuse is really meaningless. The excuse was, well, we're in the middle of a pandemic and what I'm comfortable with is, I would be in classrooms visiting with folks and getting to know folks in their classrooms. And the only real option available at the time was to log into their Zooms and that just felt really awkward. And a couple times I tried to do that, people are like, why is he here in my Zoom and he's looking into my house? And so I know all the excuses I made for why I didn't do it. None of those are particularly useful, relevant to our children.

AJ: 18:08 What they really needed me to do is be more effective at relationship development with their frontline educators in my first year. And I realistically just simply didn't do that. With the benefit of hindsight in recognizing how much more valuable it would've been to do so, rather than to kind of be scared of the pandemic reality, I should have just created another way. If I had to do it over again, what I'd probably do is say, hey, I still wanna connect. I can't physically come to your classroom and I don't really wanna join your Zoom classroom, but maybe we can have a Zoom session when students aren't around or we can just connect and learn. What's working for you, what's not working, how can I be of service? And all the basic conversations I would've had in person if classes were in session is on me to find a different way. And honestly, I didn't find that way. So the interactions I did have were far fewer than they would normally have been. I didn't adapt well for that. So that's in retrospect, a real learning of mine is that I often try to pride myself of being flexible and a problem solver. I didn't apply any of that

whatsoever to what, in retrospect, is a really easily solved problem.

Steve: 19:22 Am I hearing asking and listening as a key to building those relationships?

AJ: 19:28 Absolutely. And my normal way of doing that was taken off the table and I didn't adapt. I didn't adapt in the way I needed to. So I
had these larger group sessions but people were always super awkward in these massive group Zooms with like 80 other people and you didn't get that any sense of that connection.

Steve: 19:47 You can't get the ask and listen.

AJ: 19:48 Exactly. And so what I needed, especially in a leadership role, my educators, I owed it to them to have figured that out and I did not solve for X.

Steve: 20:01 That's powerful. I'm really glad you shared that. That's really powerful. How about telling us a little bit about what folks are gonna find in the book, "Great On their Behalf."

AJ: 20:11 This has been quite the journey. The basic intention here is to reveal one particular path toward continuous improvement for school boards. That if we really believe that what's possible for children emerges from changes in adult behavior, then we have to have a vision for how do we change adult behavior in the most optimized ways. And from my view, whether it's in the classroom or the boardroom, that's all about continuous improvement. It's all about getting a mindset that's about growth. It's about getting clear about what we're trying to accomplish and clarifying those priorities and then monitoring progress, figure out are we actually moving in the direction we intend and then aligning all of our time, talent, and treasure with whatever the monitoring told us. If it says that we need more instruction time here, if we need to change pedagogy here, that we align our efforts with whatever the

data from monitoring is telling us.

AJ: 21:14 And then we communicate about the results, and then we start it all over again. And for me, this continuous improvement cycle is just as necessary in the boardroom as it is in the classroom. And so, I'd go a step further to say, boards really want to drive a culture of continuous improvement in the classroom, their access to that is to be mindful about how are we modeling a culture of continuous improvement in the boardroom. And so that's what this book really is about, is how can boards model continuous improvement in the boardroom? What are the things that are standing in the way of that being a dominant use of the board's time when they're coming together month after month? And what could the impact for children be if boards chose to behave that way? So that's what the book is about. And also just a little bit of cathartic opportunity to share some of the amazing stories of interactions with boards and other groups that I've been able to have over the years that help give some color to the ideas of continuous improvement and what that looks like piece by piece.

Steve: 22:28 Well, I started a phrase a whole lot of years back that said the message I wanted boards to get when I worked in the district was that as a board, you need to get the message out to the community: we're the best we've ever been and we need to change.

AJ: 22:45 I really appreciate that because both embracing that the progress that we've made is worth honoring. While also, completely embracing that now it's time to take it to the next level. And I think if you're not artful about that, so I love the way you describe that because
if you were less artful about that, and I think it's easy for people to say, oh, what we're doing now must be trash, that's not the message.

Steve: 23:18 If the community doesn't believe in you, why

should they invest in you?

Steve: 23:22 So you gotta have the celebratory part.

AJ: 23:25 Or, the opposite end is absolutely dangerous. There's no improvement to be had here. We're exactly where we need to be.

Steve: 23:32 I agree. I worked in too many of those districts.

Steve: 23:39 Because it didn't take long to look around and shine the light on a couple of other districts or, or schools.

AJ: 23:45 Well, but we're better than them. But now to be fair, Steve, part of the challenge is, I think there's some danger that people experience from making the suggestion that we need to continue improving. I don't know if you've experienced that or not, if there's been a fearfulness of making that claim that we need to continue to grow for fear of how they might be attacked in the community. I don't know if you've experienced that or not.

Steve: 24:15 Yeah. That's why I thought you had to have both pieces there. The celebration of how we got here, and all you gotta do is be future focused to see that that that continuing to deliver what we're delivering will probably be insufficient in the way things change.

AJ: 24:37 Yeah. There's more opportunity for growth on the part of our students and the likelihood of that emerging is bound up in are we willing to be on this continuous improvement journey, not satisfied with the remarkable things that our students are doing, saying there's even more remarkable-ness available down this path.

Steve: 25:01 And you usually don't have to dig too far in the top systems to find some students for whom it's not happening.

AJ: 25:11 Yeah.

Steve: 25:12 And those places can be even harder to change because you've got so much evidence that you're doing it correct, even though it's not correct for some smaller group.

AJ: 25:23 Well, I've heard superintendents actually say this – I know that if my board changes behavior, we could generate more alignment and we could get better results for our students, but if we change what they're doing right now, it could just get worse. So let's just stick with what we got and leave well enough alone.

Steve: 25:44 Well AJ, it's been a great conversation. I'm really glad to be able to get this out to my listeners. I'm wondering if you'd share with folks the best way to connect with you if if they wanna take the conversation further and also find out about your book.

AJ: 26:02 Yeah. I continue to try to share this message with folks and definitely want to engage with anyone out there who's just trying to find a way forward and how do we cause there to be a maximal alignment between what's happening in our classrooms, what's happening in our boardrooms. For people who wanna be part of that conversation, feel free to reach out to me personally. You can just go to ajcrabill.com or if you wanna learn more about the book, you can go to greatontheirbehalf.com and read the first chapter and then if you decide you want to kind of go all out and check out Amazon and all the other places.

Steve: 26:41 Great. Well we will stick both those things in the lead-in to the podcast make it easier for folks to find. Thank you so much.

AJ: 26:50 No, this was a ton of fun. And you offered too, and I was so busy engrossed in our work, but I actually wanna write them both down.
And so there are two things that you said both that I absolutely enjoyed. Do you recall those?

Steve: 27:06 Well one was for the school board, it was that we're the best we've ever been and we need to change.

AJ: 27:14 Yes. That was one of them.

Steve: 27:16 And the other was, for professional learning communities, what do the kids need us to learn?

AJ: 27:22 Yes. I have a Google doc that I maintain that has just all the cool and inspirational things that I've run across in that particular day. I try to jot them down and then when I'm having one of those horrible nightmares days, and there's no inspiration to be had, I just open this file back up and no, you know what, there's some awesome humans out here. Let me get back in this.

Steve: 27:47 Very cool.

AJ: 27:47 So for both the joy of today's conversation and for the future times that you will pull me back from my malaise, thank you very much.

Steve: 27:56 I will be following you and I hope we get a chance to connect again. Take care.

AJ: 28:02 Have a good one.

Steve: 28:05 Thank you for listening. You can subscribe to Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud on iTunes and Podbean. And please remember to rate and
review us on iTunes. I also want to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter @stevebarkley or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.