

Its really tricky when something potentially harmful is buried within something that is arguably good. Just take one look at the way legislation is done in our country. Proposed bills can have one piece that everyone wants fixed, buried deep inside a bunch of bad ideas. Alternatively, there could one really bad idea overwhelmed by a whole bunch of “common sense”, because what idiot would dare vote against “common sense”? What monster could be against the gift of an expensive literacy program? But this is not a literacy program. The literacy tutoring offer of this proposal is buried within something much bigger in scope, that the public should be made aware of.

Some board members voiced concerns that the unanimous vote requirement seemed manipulative. I shared those concerns, and in the Q and A session with the foundation representative Lisa Furseth, their response did not alleviate my concerns:

"A no vote isn't neutral. its opposition. If you're having conversations with other people in the district, if those conversations trickle down in a way that create opposition in that environment, that will not help us be successful. Your being all in matters."

This kind of language should cause **alarm bells**, as conversations about the success of the program and whether or not it is good for the students and staff should ALWAYS be open for discussion, even if it would lead to once again pulling out of a pilot program. By forcing such a strong commitment from the school board, the foundation makes it less likely that the pilot be abandoned, even if it isn't working, is actively doing harm, or no longer has community support.

The foundation wants unanimous board approval and explicit buy-in from each board member, “skin in the game” to be precise, because what this is is a radical social experiment. Quote from Brent Fox:

"It's a test. We're gonna try something new."

This board, on their way out the door, is deciding whether or not one of our schools will be used in this psychological, sociological test. As with *any ethical* experiment, especially the ones that may negatively impact participants, it CANNOT continue without the full informed consent of those who will be involved and impacted. You cannot put the kids into a program like this without explicitly telling the parents and teachers **ahead of time** about the potential dangers and increased expectations that will be placed on them. I'm not privy to the conversations that happened between the board and principals, or between the principals and teachers so how informed they are about this, I can only guess. But I've also seen no evidence that such an outreach has been made to the parents, in fact I'm seeing evidence of the opposite. For instance, the yes or no vote is happening before the school has even been announced. When asked about family engagement, the Hendricks Foundation offered up a “tool” in open literacy that helps you communicate with parents about what you're doing with the student. That's great, but why is the student already active in the program when you're attempting to explain it to the parents? All of the parents of the chosen school, not just the ones in the literacy program, would need to be informed of this colossal shift, including a full disclosure of the associated hazards. The school district could even be opening itself up to a lawsuit if it continues onward *without* that informed parental consent.

The Skyrocket program is not widely vetted or researched. In fact there are no 3rd party research studies that measure the success of the program. In spite of what was alluded to in the presentation, their coaching is only actively being used in about 60 schools nation-wide, (a large number of which are faith-based, which may present it's own issues) with around 240 schools using their frameworks *only*, **not** the full, in depth, on site coaching service that is being pushed here. As an alternative to any scientific research, the foundation pivoted to their anecdotal experience with the Skyrocket. To be clear, Skyrocket has nothing to do with the literacy portion of this proposal, but it is

the most expensive part. Open Literacy is being coupled with Skyrocket in this unique proposal from the Hendricks foundation, and it has been sold to the public AS a literacy program, which could be viewed as a deceptive move. If you look at where the real money is, it would appear that the Hendricks foundation thinks improving our school culture is actually more important than tutoring kids in reading.

Professional Dignity & The “Uncanny Joy Factor”:

I would like to begin by pointing out the harm this program can do to the teachers, because many other ethical problems with this proposal stem directly from that perspective. To understand this harm, you first have to understand that Skyrocket evaluates it's teachers through a lens of “emotional constancy”. Utilizing an “emotional constancy and presence rubric”, coaches will look for the "Joy Factor", where an “acceptable” classroom culture requires the teacher to pivot back to a *joyful* tone the instant the student becomes compliant. Teachers are continually monitored (that's the “accountability” they refer to so often) for data collection by the Skyrocket teams, and micromanaged down to body posture, tone of voice, square of shoulders, where they are standing in the room, how often they move around it, how many words they used in their command to students, facial expressions (neutral or joyful only, thank you!), and whether or not they “emotionally leaked” a sarcastic comment, eye roll, or sigh. A coach can then give a poor evaluation of the classroom culture based on any of these minor behaviors, stunting progress in the hierarchical program, and making teachers feel dehumanized. These strict rules and practices can also have the classroom feeling more like a “boot camp” than a joyful environment, adding preparation workload and stress on the teacher by focusing intensely on eliminating “dead time”.

The emotional shifts are one of the hardest “skills” Skyrocket coaches evaluate because real humans don't naturally shift their emotions in that way. The “joy factor” is simply an emotional script, and when a rubric mandates how a person must *appear* to feel, it creates ethical red flags. Forcing someone to display an emotion they don't feel (faking a smile) or suppress one they do feel (hiding sadness) causes "surface acting." Research shows this leads to burnout, job dissatisfaction, and emotional exhaustion. Sure enough, teachers stuck within the Skyrocket program and other similar programs that center on “emotional constancy” have reported feeling like they are “under a microscope”, exhausted, and forced into in-authenticity. In our unique case with this “gift” proposal, these damaging behaviors will be incentivized in the form of staff bonuses. Another piece to consider is that emotional display rules are not universal. What one culture views as "paying close attention", another may view as "being aggressive". Similarly, neurodivergent individuals may have different emotional display rules, and evaluating them on a neurotypical standard can be discriminatory.

The damaging Role of "Real-Time Coaching" and “Emotional Constancy” in the lives of students:

The “Real Time Coaching” offered by the Skyrocket program can present some emotionally and socially damaging situations, as well as professional dignity challenges. In RTC, coaches provide in-the-moment feedback during live instruction in 3 ways:

- Whisper Coaching: The coach stands next to the teacher and whispers corrections,
- Hand Signals: The coach uses pre-set signals like pointing to their watch to tell the teacher they are moving too slowly, and
- Model/Pause: The coach may briefly step in, say "*Class, let's try that transition again,*" model it, and then hand it back to the teacher.

Undoubtedly, having a coach interrupt their lesson to tap their watch, tell them to "stand in the corner", "stop talking", or whisper body movement related instruction in their ear can and will make some teachers feel demeaned. Because this coaching is done in full view of the students, if they recognize this behavior as demeaning toward the teacher, they may then begin to see the coach as the authority figure instead of the teacher, presenting classroom behavioral challenges to overcome in the future. But what might be more damaging than that is if the student learned to internalize that type of micromanagement and disrespect as "normal behavior" in the workplace.

Skyrocket also teaches that "arguing is a win for the student." If a student is refusing, a Skyrocket coach might whisper a prompt to prevent the teacher from getting into a back-and-forth argument:

"Don't engage. Walk away,"

Or, a coach might direct the Teacher to narrate by finding a student near the "refuser" and praise them: *"I love how Julia is already on question three."*

This is meant to make the refusing student feel invisible in their defiance. Educators with bad experiences often cite this specific area as problematic, feeling that they are ignoring a student's underlying emotional needs or trauma just to hit a compliance metric. For examples:

- A teacher may skip checking in on a student who looks upset in the morning because they are hyper-focused on a 10-second compliance metric, or
- feel pressured to "be tough" to prove they have control because a coach is watching, or
- walk away from a "talking back" student (as per Skyrocket guidelines) who really needed a 1 on 1 conversation.

If a student is having a genuine crisis, being met with a "Broken Record" script or being dismissed entirely can escalate their anger, deepen their emotional distress, and damage rapport. Often, teachers can feel caught in this trap between building a relationship and following the Skyrocket "Lever Action" to keep their coach happy. The students then also lose warm relationships with trusted teachers when their behaviors seem robotic, uncharacteristic, or cold. Again, we would be incentivizing this type of emotional coldness with the proposal, on top of the fact that we as flawed humans will sometimes fold under the pressure of being watched by a coach, undoubtedly, anyway.

In 2nd and 3rd grade, children are developing social intuition. If a teacher's face says "joy" but their body language screams "frustration," it creates a double-bind that can be confusing and anxiety-inducing for students. Authenticity builds relational trust, and these children are old enough to detect a "fake" persona. Life is not emotionally constant, so attempting to create an uncanny valley version of life at our schools with "emotional constancy" rules encourages children to bury their own true emotions. This can be incredibly damaging in adulthood, socially, emotionally, and psychologically. On the other hand, when students see a teacher being honest about a difficult moment, they feel it is safe for them to be honest about their own struggles. According to Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, students learn to label and manage their own feelings by seeing adults "name it to tame it." The Real Time Coaching offered by Skyrocket can also make a teacher *prioritize* the strategic disguise of emotions over genuine human connection, and one more time, The Hendricks Foundation Proposal creates a conflict of interest where teachers are rewarded for choosing classroom culture over the students psychological and emotional well-being.

School, district, and community: Not getting what's promised

Classroom culture is Skyrockets absolute first priority. A teacher does not receive coaching on academic rigor or content until they consistently hit at least the 85% proficiency in having a “stable classroom environment.” Coaches are instructed to ignore instructional gaps (like poor questioning or weak lesson flow) if they deem the classroom culture to be inadequate. If a coach stays focused on Tier 1 for too long, experienced teachers may feel their instructional skills are being ignored or that they are being held back for minor procedural errors. Some describe a feeling of "moving goalposts." They might work hard to fix one "Lever Action," only for the coach to find another tiny procedural error the next week, preventing them from ever getting to the "real teaching" they signed up for, and which the district hopes to gain from them.

Skyrockets school culture audits assess adult and student interactions, such as entry procedures, behavioral norms, activity transitions, but also staff meeting information, staff culture, and district-school communication. This will not just impact the students who are in the literacy program with OpenLiteracy. It will have a school wide impact as skyrocket is in every classroom. Can one school board even give long term authorization for them to come and observe every part of every interaction at the school? The board has even briefly mentioned the possibility of expanding to more schools in previous meetings, and I have to wonder how we would pay for that when we already don't have money. I certainly wouldn't vote to increase my taxes for Skyrocket.

The Skyrocket website also discusses “district and network audits” where they come and evaluate the health, relationships, and culture of the entire district. I don't think that is in the proposal, however, the community doesn't know them. If the parents were fully informed, many would not want Skyrockets fingers in all of the schools pies, or even in proximity to them- especially considering the potential for district-wide, sensitive information to leak to Skyrocket or the Hendricks foundation. The district could also potentially face lawsuits from parents if any psychological harm comes from this experimental program, leaving a lasting stain on BSD. This is a huge commitment to a problematic and falsely advertised program, being voted on by a board that won't be around to do the work that they admit will be hard on everyone involved.

Tech and stranger danger: Protecting Beloit's vulnerable families:

Beloit's citizens may also be uncomfortable with the idea of Skyrocket selling themselves as having the “right culture” for our schools. Considering everything that is happening around the country with the rise of white supremacy and authoritarianism in our federal government, their hyper-focus on “culture” is actually culturally insensitive. Also, the proposal aims, in no uncertain terms, to bring strangers into the school to do this culture modification, as well as putting the students in front of another screen for reading lessons with remote teachers from out of state. Where just a year ago, I probably wouldn't bat an eye at a nice little online reading program like this, it is unfortunately coming into our community awareness parallel with intense A.I., intense facial recognition capabilities, a hyper-surveillance state, increased emphasis on compiling information across many platforms and systems, and technology being used to hunt people down for skin color, religious affiliation, immigration status, or political dissent. The more private we can keep our students identities at this time, the better, and this proposal seems like it will do the opposite of that.

Conclusion -

It was my understanding that a schools culture is derived naturally and authentically through the combination of unique personalities within it, not scripted into existence through a, frankly creepy, teacher grading system. It might be in the School Board's mind to take this one time, 3 year offer from the Hendricks Foundation with the intention of learning some of these techniques and then spreading that throughout the district if it works. For example, the "One Voice" Reset, the strong start routine, narrating students positive behavior more often than you correct behavior by at least 3 to 1, these things could no doubt create a disciplined, joyful learning environment and I think we should look into some of these strategies **when the teachers find them to be natural and appropriate**. But that type of research is available online for free without someone looking over our teachers shoulders.

The words "urgent need" were used in the proposal 3 times. I understand that we do have a situation with declining literacy rates, but insisting upon implementation of this program by the fall and balking at waiting a year doesn't seem to me to be in the spirit of fully informing the community, either. Giving bonuses to teachers and staff for "strong school-wide culture and proficiency" creates a **MASSIVE** conflict of interest by incentivizing an environment which does not center on the well-being of the students, but again, the score they get from skyrocket.

Ultimately, literacy scores are dropping and parents aren't engaged because our families are in economic turmoil. Something that would really help the kids in our community would be stable access to affordable housing, food, health and mental healthcare. Because I agree with skyrocket on one thing, that in order to be successful, the foundation of a thing has to be solid, but it would seem that we have different interpretations of what "foundational" means for a public school child who is learning to read. The emotional and physical safety of our kids, the professional dignity of our teachers, the privacy of our vulnerable families, and the integrity of our district is worth far more than 2.5 million dollars.