Context is everything. Whether a program improves student learning very likely depends on the system it is embedded in; it’s context. It may be that a lot of efforts to improve student learning have failed because of the U.S. system’s key elements, including especially the Roots of the Problem of low performance; Nation at Risk outcomes. Many of those efforts might have worked in a different system; that is, with a different set of funding and governance policies. But little, if anything, survives ‘the blob;’ a popular, derogatory metaphor for the anti-reform education establishment initially dubbed the blob by Reagan Administration Education Secretary William Bennett.

In theory, programs like Head Start and Pre-K – at least Pre-K targeted at children with poor home environments – should produce measurable benefits. But no large scale efforts have, which can be the result of politically correct design or implementation flaws; that is, government-run pre-K will suffer the same kinds of debilitating political imperatives that have increasingly crippled the
K-12 system. But with such a near-universal failure to detect positive effects ‘downstream,’ apparent Head Start and Pre-K ineffectiveness is more likely the result of the low-performing school system that enroll most Pre-K and Head Start graduates. Pre-K and Head Start may create 5-year-olds better prepared for Kindergarten, but the K-12 system’s shortcomings prevent the improvement in some 5-year-olds from being seen in better educated 18-year-olds. Measurable program effects often dissipate in much less than 13 years.

Some of the other policies and programs that seem like they should produce positive measurable effects, but haven’t (like increased spending), have been discussed previously, and others like teacher merit pay will arise in future blog posts.