

VOLUME 1 • ISSUE 3 • AUGUST 2026

ACELLUS[®] JOURNAL

INFORM • INSPIRE • UNITE

THIS ISSUE

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

How Acellus is ensuring that every diploma it awards represents something a student truly earned.



- **ACELLUS UPDATES**
From Dr. Roger Billings
- **THE INVENTIONEERS**
Coding – The New Literacy
- **THE FEATURE**
Unlocking College Scholarships

International Academy of Science

Welcome to the third issue of the Acellus Journal — the flagship monthly publication of the Acellus Learning System and the International Academy of Science. Every issue is built for you: the teachers, parents, students, administrators, and staff who make this community extraordinary. Here is what awaits you inside.

04 **From the Leadership: Insights and Perspectives**

Three voices from inside Acellus. Dr. Roger Billings addresses questions from parents on academic integrity and the Acellus diploma. Executive Director Joshua Billings welcomes new families to the Acellus community and explains what makes learning with Acellus different. Editor Jackson Hunt reflects on what he saw when he paid attention to the parents at Acellus World.

08 **Acellus Now: News & Happenings**

A new system to protect the integrity of every Acellus diploma. Two students recognized on a national stage for outstanding academic research. Here is what is happening across the Acellus community right now.

12 **Beyond Acellus: Graduate Spotlight**

Eden Albelda grew up riding horses. By high school, that wasn't a hobby anymore — it was the thing her whole schedule was built around. This is the story of how she found a school that moved with her instead of against her, and how she ended up signed to the University of Tennessee at Martin's Division 1 Equestrian Team.

14 **The Inventioners: Coding — The New Literacy**

What does a decade of STEM education actually look like? Starting as early as third grade, the Acellus STEM-10 curriculum takes students from basic coding with interactive robots all the way through high school specialization. Here is how it works — and why it matters for your child's future.

16 **Schools That Shine: Acellus in Action**

Poplar School District in northeastern Montana serves a largely Native American student population on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. Forty percent of this year's graduating class would not have earned their diploma without Acellus. This is the story of how that happened.

20 **Course Catalog & Community Voices**

A new elementary course joins the Acellus lineup — Elementary Emotional Intelligence, helping young learners name, understand, and manage their feelings. Plus, we sat down with one Oklahoma mom who refused to let bullying define her son's education—or his confidence. Read about her journey with Acellus.

24 **A Quality Education Requires Time and Effort**

Dr. Roger Billings on the science and learning strategies that help students catch up, keep up, and get ahead—without the burnout.

28 **The Feature: Unlocking College Scholarships**

A debt-free education at a prestigious university is less about luck than most families think. Executive Director Joshua Billings breaks down the three levers — course rigor, test scores, and GPA — that can turn scholarship money from a long shot into a plan.

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FROM THE LEADERSHIP

INSIGHTS AND PERSPECTIVES

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS FROM OUR ACELLUS PARENTS

By **Dr. Roger Billings**



Dear Acellus Parents,

Thank you for the thoughtful questions you continue to send in. I firmly believe that you, the parents, are the primary decision makers in your children's education, and that Acellus is at its best when we work as partners. Many of the improvements we have made over the years began as suggestions — and sometimes as pushback — from parents like you. Please keep it coming.

Question 1:

What is the story on the changes to the step limit? What does it mean, and what is the reasoning behind it?

For many years, we had no need for a step limit of any kind. The students drawn to Acellus were seriously interested in a quality education, and they moved through their courses at a pace that reflected real learning. After we became accredited, however, we began to see a new kind of enrollment: students with little interest in learning who simply wanted to "grab" a high school diploma as quickly as possible.

This is not a problem we discovered last month. A year ago, I brought it to the attention of our community and announced that we were developing software to limit this kind of abuse of the system. If you would like the fuller background, I invite you to read my paper, ['A Quality Education Requires Time and Effort'](#). We then deliberately delayed turning the step limit on until this summer, when most of our students are on break, to minimize disruption to families in the middle of their studies.

I want everyone to understand just how extreme the situation had become. We had students completely finishing AP Calculus — one of the most important and most challenging courses we offer — in just three weeks. Others were completing AP Statistics in four. These are

full-year courses whose lessons, by their very nature, require sustained time and effort to master. Not even the most gifted student could genuinely move through these courses that quickly. Something was amiss — and the answer shocked us. A few of students were having their coursework done for them, usually by paid parties overseas. We immediately went to work building new tools that can determine whether work is original or hired out, and where we found lessons that were not completed by our own student, we removed that credit.

I will be candid with you: those removals are the source of much of the loudest anger you may have seen directed at Acellus, and at me personally, in recent weeks. At the same time, I know that not every parent who has raised concerns about the step limit falls into that category — far from it. Many of you have sincere questions about how the limit will affect your own diligent, hardworking student, and I welcome those questions. That is exactly what this forum is for. What I would gently ask is that we keep the conversation respectful. Our support team members are good people doing their best to protect the integrity of your children's education, and when they are met with profanity and abuse on the phone, we risk losing them. They deserve better, and I know the overwhelming majority of our parents agree.

Here is what I am fighting for: the integrity of the Acellus diploma. If we allow hired work and empty transcripts to stand, that diploma will no longer carry the prestigious reputation it enjoys today — and it is your children, the ones doing the work honestly, who would pay the price. Acellus is the platform for students who

want to earn a real education. Students looking for shortcuts will need to find them somewhere else.

Now, to set the record straight on how the limit actually works: every course has its own step limit, set specifically for that course and the nature of its lessons. In every case, the limit is set higher than the pace we recommend for most students. A serious student working at a strong, even accelerated pace will not run into it. The limit exists only to stop the kind of activity no genuine student could produce. We do not want to be a shortcut school. We want to be known for highly qualified, well-prepared graduates — and we want the Acellus diploma to open doors and launch our students into successful futures.

Finally, a heartfelt shout-out to the many parents who have reached out in support. Your posts, your letters on rogerbillings.com, and even your cards and mail through the Post Office have sustained me during this time of transition. Thank you... thank you!

Question 2:

What is changing about the qualifications for getting and keeping the Roger Billings Scholarship?

The requirements to maintain the Roger Billings Scholarship are changing. Watching ScienceLive will no longer be a requirement. Instead, the scholarship is being refocused on its true purpose: supporting students who are willing to make a diligent, sustained effort to obtain a high-quality education.



Going forward, these are the criteria that will be evaluated:

- **Original work.** The student will do their own work and will not arrange for someone else to do it for them. This is the foundation everything else rests on.
- **Regular, consistent study.** We like to see a student sign in and work regularly — ideally four or five days a week — spending time on the system and meeting their daily study goals, which for most students takes three to four hours of study per weekday. We absolutely allow gaps for sickness and vacations. However, when a student stops signing in without explanation, we will send a written notice to the parents, and if the pattern does not improve, the student will lose the scholarship.
- **Serious effort.** The work itself must be a genuine effort to learn. Some students simply guess at answers repeatedly or enter careless, throwaway text into the Writing Tutor. We consider that behavior a waste of our scholarship funds, and it will put the scholarship at risk.
- **A meaningful Acellus Student Journal.** Beginning this fall, Acellus will collect all of a student's writing, across all of their classes, into an annual Student Journal. Parents will be able to view this Journal at any time, and I encourage you to keep an eye on it — when students know their parents are reading, they take the work more seriously. At the high school level, we believe the Journal will become an important tool when students apply for college scholarships or for their first jobs. As this professional record accumulates year over year, we expect students to take real pride in what they have written.

I want to emphasize that none of these criteria are meant to be punitive. They describe exactly what a motivated student partnering with an engaged parent is already doing. The scholarship exists to reward and sustain that kind of effort.

One additional note: ScienceLive is not going away. Beginning next school year, ScienceLive will be offered as a regular course that students can take for a general science credit.

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As always, I welcome your comments — in favor or in opposition. Your feedback has made Acellus better at every step, and I intend to keep it that way.

Sincerely,

Roger Billings

FROM THE LEADERSHIP

INSIGHTS AND PERSPECTIVES

WELCOME TO THE ACELLUS FAMILY

By **Dr. Joshua Billings** · Executive Director, Acellus Academy



Every August, we watch a new wave of families cross a threshold. Some are enrolling with Acellus Academy for the first time. Some are joining us through National Cyberschool, staying connected to their local district while learning in a new way. Some are teachers walking into a classroom that now includes Acellus as part of the school day. However you arrived here, we want you to know something simple and true: you are now part of the Acellus family.

So what makes learning with Acellus different? At its core, Acellus is an adaptive learning platform that customizes instruction for each individual learner.

Every good teacher, in any classroom in the world, runs the same invisible loop: explain the idea, check whether it landed, and if it didn't, figure out why and fix it. The trouble is that even the best teacher is limited by arithmetic. One teacher, thirty students, fifty minutes. That loop can only run so many times, for so many students, with so much precision, before something has to give.

Acellus was built to run that same loop for every student, on every lesson, without that limit. It starts with the video lesson. Rather than treating a filmed lesson as a stand-in for the real thing, we treat it as its own advantage. A lesson can be rehearsed and refined until the explanation is as clear as we can make it. It can be watched again if a student needs to hear it twice. It carries a teacher's voice and face into a student's home in a way a textbook or worksheet never could.

After a lesson comes an assessment, and this is where our approach starts to look different from most. In a typical classroom, an assessment produces a grade and not much else. At Acellus, an assessment is a diagnostic tool first and a grade second. We built our system so that even a wrong answer carries information. Two students can miss the very same question for two completely different reasons, and it matters which one happened.

Picture two fifth graders who both get a fractions question wrong. One understands fractions reasonably well but quietly believes that eight is bigger than four, so eighths must be bigger than fourths. That student needs about ninety seconds of correction. Their misunderstanding is a pothole, a small flaw in an otherwise sound road. The other student may be missing something more fundamental about what a fraction even represents. Two students, the same wrong answer, two very different repairs.

This is why, when Acellus finds a gap, it does not simply replay the same lesson at the same speed and hope it lands differently the second time. It delivers what we call *Vectored Instruction*[®], targeted teaching aimed directly at the specific misunderstanding a student has.

"We call it vectored because, like a vector in mathematics, it has both direction and force. It is aimed, not generic."

Lesson, assessment, repair. Then the student is challenged again on the very concept they struggled with, and this time, when they succeed, it is because they actually understand it. That earned success, repeated lesson after lesson, is what we care about most. It is not just about the score on that one assignment. It is about a student learning that they are capable of understanding hard things, one small win at a time.

That is what your student is stepping into this year. Not a faster version of school, and not an easier one, but one built to notice where they are and meet them exactly there. We are glad you are here.

Dr. Joshua Billings

Executive Director, Acellus Academy

WHAT THEY ALREADY KNOW

By **Jackson Hunt** · Editor, *Acellus Journal*

Acellus World 2026 was my first. I didn't know what to expect walking in — I had heard enough to know it was something worth seeing, but there is a difference between hearing about a room and standing in it.

What caught me off guard wasn't the scale of it, though the scale was something. It was the parents.

You notice them quickly. They are not there because someone told them to come. They drove hours, in some cases, because they wanted to be in the room. They have opinions about the platform. They know which courses their kid loved and which ones they pushed through. They can tell you, without looking anything up, exactly when things turned around.

What I remember most from those two days is how happy everyone was. Not in a polished, everything-is-fine kind of way. Genuinely happy. Parents walking the exhibit hall with their kids, stopping at booths, watching demonstrations — and smiling. Not because someone asked them to. Because they were somewhere they wanted to be, with people who understood what they had been through to get there. There is a specific kind of ease that comes over people when they are in a room full of others who just get it. That was Acellus World.

When I sat down with parents and asked them about their experience, most of them didn't need much prompting. They weren't looking for validation. They already knew what Acellus had done for their family. What they wanted was somewhere to put it. That is not something people do casually. When someone starts talking about their family — about a decision they made and what it cost them and what it gave back — they are telling you something they have thought about for a long time. I tried not to take that lightly.

Two days later, I left with one clear thought: I hope there are many more to come.

There is something clarifying about sitting across from a parent who has done the research, made the call, and come out the other side with something to show for it. They are not guessing. They know. And the way they talk about it — directly, without a lot of hedging — is different from almost any other conversation I have in this job. These are

not people who stumbled into a decision. They made one. And it worked.

That is who this issue is for.

Inside these pages, parents will find practical tools for the road ahead — resources on scholarships, academic integrity, and the kinds of opportunities that open up when a student has the right foundation under them. Not everything will apply to every family. But something in here will.

We built this issue around the parent who shows up informed, engaged, and ready to do whatever it takes for their kid. The one who drove hours to be in that room in Kansas City. The one who already knows — and just needs somewhere to put it.

That is the standard I am holding this issue to.

"They already knew what Acellus had done for their family. What they wanted was somewhere to put it."



Jackson Hunt

Editor, *Acellus Journal*

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Featured on Science LIVE

“Knowledge, or a piece of paper with your name on it?”

Dr. Roger Billings built Acellus around a simple belief: that the point of education is to actually learn something. Not to move through a checklist. Not to collect credits. To know things — deeply, genuinely, in a way that holds up when it matters.

That belief is being tested right now.

THE PROBLEM

Acellus Academy has earned a strong reputation with the United States military because its graduates consistently score high on entrance exams. Those scores mean something because they reflect real knowledge. And real knowledge only comes from students who did the real work. That connection — between effort and outcome — is the whole point of an Acellus education.

But a troubling pattern has emerged — not just at Acellus, but across education broadly. A partner university put it plainly:

"Our biggest problem is that students graduating from high school are not ready for college."



Too many arrive on campus spending their first two years catching up on material they were never truly asked to master. The shortcuts that felt harmless in the moment compound into something much harder to undo. A student who coasted through high school does not suddenly find the foundation they skipped. They just encounter the gap in a harder place, at a higher cost.

Acellus has also identified something more deliberate: a group of students hiring others to complete their coursework on their behalf. Not cutting corners — outsourcing the work entirely. It is the gas can handed to a stranger. The effort goes in, someone else benefits, and the student walks away with nothing.

That ends here.

WHAT ACELLUS IS DOING ABOUT IT

In response, Acellus has launched two dedicated teams — the Education Integrity Department and the Integrity Support Team — and implemented a new GoldKey-inspired system designed to detect whether the work on screen was actually done by the student whose name is on the account.

When it wasn't, those lessons are removed from the system entirely. The work disappears because it was never really theirs to keep. And for students caught hiring outside help, it may be considered grounds for termination of their scholarship — a consequence that reflects how seriously Acellus takes the integrity of its diploma.

The Integrity Support Team works with students to get back on track when irregularities are found. The goal is not punishment for its own sake. It is to redirect students toward the real thing before the gap gets any wider. But the stakes are real, and families should know what they are before they are ever relevant.

“Superintendents who have worked with multiple programs consistently note that Acellus makes cheating significantly harder than competing homeschool and charter programs. That is by design. And it is one of the reasons an Acellus diploma carries the weight it does.”

DR. BILLINGS ON WHAT SHORTCUTS ACTUALLY COST

Dr. Billings tells a story.

A man's car runs out of gas on the side of the road. He walks to a nearby gas station, fills up a can, and is heading back when a stranger offers to help. "Put your gas in my tank," the stranger says, "and the can won't be so heavy to carry." The man thinks that sounds like a great deal. He



pumps his gas into the stranger's car. The stranger drives off. The man walks back to his car with an empty can.

“That is what a shortcut looks like. You put in the effort. Someone else gets the benefit. And you end up right where you started — with nothing to show for it.”

The same thing happens in a classroom. Difficult material is difficult for a reason. Wrestling with a concept you do not understand yet, pushing through the frustration, and arriving on the other side with real comprehension — that process builds something no shortcut can replicate. It is what Dr. Billings calls grit. The mental resilience that does not just help students pass a test — it helps them handle whatever comes after the test. A harder course. A college professor who does not curve. A job that expects them to actually know what their resume says they know.

“When a student cheats, they are not just breaking a rule. They are handing their gas to someone else and walking home empty. And at some point, the car is still on the side of the road.”



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR FAMILIES

The temptation to take an easier path is real — especially during a hard stretch, when a student is behind and the finish line feels far away. That is worth acknowledging. But so are the consequences.

Acellus' Academic Integrity Policy and Code of Conduct are outlined in the Terms and Conditions of Enrollment that every family agrees to at enrollment. The expectations are clear. So are the stakes.



"The goal has never been students who have moved through the material. It has always been students who actually know it.

That is what opens doors. That is what holds up in college, in a career, in a military entrance exam, in every room a student will ever walk into after graduation."

A diploma means something when it represents something real. Acellus is committed to making sure it does.

ACELLUS ACADEMY NAMED A TOP 10 SCHOOL BY LUMIERE EDUCATION

Acellus Academy was recently recognized by Lumiere Education as one of the top 10 schools in the United States. This acknowledgement highlights the might of Acellus' curriculum and students.

Acellus Academy has been named one of the top 10 schools in the United States by Lumiere Education — a recognition that speaks directly to the strength of both the curriculum and the students working through it.

Two Acellus Academy students are at the center of that recognition. Siyana, from Malibu, California, and a second Acellus student earned the High Honor Award and Excellence Award respectively in the competitive Lumiere Scholars Essay Award — an international academic writing competition recognizing exceptional analytical and research-based essays where only a small percentage of submissions receive distinction.

Their research and writing placed them in the 97th and 95th percentiles nationally, and both essays have been selected for publication in the Oxford Journal of Student Scholarship.

Siyana's essay responded to the prompt: "Which problem of turbulence is the greatest problem of turbulence?" Her argument went deeper than identifying a single missing equation. She contended that turbulence exposes a fundamental conceptual gap in how physics organizes understanding — that the true challenge is not in mathematics, physics, or computation alone, but in the absence of a coherent level of explanation across scales. It was a piece of thinking that impressed reviewers sorting through thousands of submissions.

"I am truly honored to receive this award," Siyana wrote. "Knowing that scholars who review thousands of submissions valued my work is inspiring, and I hope to encourage other students to pursue their academic interests with dedication and excitement."

WHAT IS LUMIERE EDUCATION

Lumiere Education gives middle and high school students the opportunity to produce original, university-level research with one-on-one guidance from scholars and researchers at institutions including Harvard, Yale, and Stanford. Students choose from a range of subjects — engineering, math, business, psychology, and more — and develop their projects around prompts submitted by professors at highly accredited universities.

The results speak for themselves. In 2025, Lumiere received more than 2,000 submissions from students across 111 countries and awarded more than \$700,000 in scholarship money. Alumni of the program are four times more likely to gain acceptance to an Ivy League institution than non-participants — moving the average acceptance rate from 5% to 20%.



BEYOND ACELLUS

GRADUATE SPOTLIGHT

FROM THE BARN TO THE BIG ORANGE

THE BEGINNING

Eden Albelda has been riding horses most of her life. By high school that wasn't a hobby anymore — it was the thing her whole schedule was built around.

She spent her freshman and sophomore years at a large public high school near Oak Hill, Virginia, just outside D.C. It wasn't a bad school. It just wasn't built for someone who needed to be somewhere else half the time. She was missing class for competitions and the makeup work kept stacking up. Something had to give.

"I definitely faced a lot of issues with having to do makeup work," she says. "But the flexibility was really helpful."

The family started looking for another option. They talked to another equestrian family dealing with the same thing — trying to balance college recruiting with a school that couldn't accommodate the travel. They looked at a few programs and narrowed it down. Acellus kept coming up. It was rigorous, asynchronous, and NCAA accredited — that last part mattered a lot for a family with Division 1 recruiting on the horizon.

"Acellus was the only one that was super rigorous and still going to give me a good education," Eden says, "and also was NCAA accredited — which was a big selling point being that we were going for athletics collegiately."

WHY ACELLUS

The decision was a family one, but Eden was the one pushing for it. She didn't have much of a public school social life to leave behind — her friends were at the barn.



Eden Albelda, Acellus Academy Class of 2026, photographed at Acellus World in Kansas City on the day of her graduation.

QUICK FACTS

NAME

Eden Albelda

FROM

Oak Hill, Virginia

GRADUATED FROM

Acellus Academy —
High Honors, 4.0 GPA

FAVORITE COURSE

History with Dr. Todd
Edmond

CURRENTLY

Enrolled at University of
Tennessee at Martin —
Division 1 Equestrian
Team

MAJOR

Animal and Veterinary
Sciences

She made the switch for her junior year. The hardest part wasn't the coursework. It was learning to manage her own time when nobody was managing it for her.

"I think the hardest part was adjusting to the whole time management thing," she says. "Being able to allot my time out to all of my different responsibilities, including school."

She worked it out — twenty minutes between horses, thirty minutes waiting on a vet appointment, an hour in the evening when the day finally slowed down. Before long she had taken complete ownership of her own education. As her mom Emily puts it: "Instead of constantly trying to fit life around education, learning became part of the life she was already building."

THE EXPERIENCE

Her favorite teacher was Dr. Todd Edmond. She had actually tracked him down at Acellus World the day of the interview.

"I went and talked to him earlier and I fully fangirled out," she says. "He was amazing."

Her English teacher also left a mark — Eden had never been an English person. That changed. Dr. Pajet's social-emotional learning course stuck with her in a quieter way.

"I use it all the time without even realizing it," she says.

The moment she knew Acellus was working didn't arrive all at once. It compounded. The clearest example is a trip to Florida — planned for two weeks, stretched to three, then four, because there was nothing pulling her back.

"If I was in public school or private school, there would be absolutely no way that we could have done that," she says. "That moment made me really thankful for Acellus being structured the way that it is."

WHERE SHE IS NOW

On June 26, 2025, Coach Caitlin Marshall called to offer Eden a spot on the University of Tennessee at Martin equestrian team.

Her mom and younger sister were in the kitchen when she picked up the phone. When she accepted, the room filled with smiles, laughter, and happy tears.

"We weren't thinking about ribbons or rankings," Emily says. "We were remembering predawn mornings at the barn, late nights unloading trailers, thousands of miles on the road, and everyone who helped shape her journey."

On May 23, 2026, Eden walked across the stage at Acellus World and received her diploma — High Honors, 4.0 GPA. That fall she heads to UT Martin to ride Division 1 and major in animal and veterinary sciences, with her eye on vet school for large animal medicine.

The path from a big Virginia public school to a Division 1 program ran through early mornings at the barn, thousands of miles of travel, and a school that moved with her instead of against her.

HER ADVICE

For students on the fence, Eden's answer is simple: take the leap. The adjustment is real — learning to manage your own time when nobody is managing it for you is harder than it sounds. But what's on the other side is worth it. "You really learn yourself," she says. "You learn so much about yourself and how to manage yourself through this program."

The platform met her where she was rather than expecting her to keep up with everyone else. Acellus teachers brought genuine enthusiasm to their subjects, and instead of expecting her to remember everything from previous years, lessons regularly reinforced important foundations before building on them. For Eden, the proof is in where she ended up — a Division 1 roster, a 4.0 GPA, and a future she built on her own terms.



Eden Albelda with Uno, Charon, and Hijinx in Oak Hill, Virginia.

FROM HER MOM

"She was much more relaxed because she wasn't worried about always being behind at school because she missed so much because of her sport. She was a more relaxed, happier child."

— Emily Albelda, Proud Mother of Eden Albelda

THE INVENTIONEERS

CODING — THE NEW LITERACY

ACELLUS STEM-10

Most schools still teach in separate blocks. Math ends, science begins. The bell rings and students close one mental compartment and open another. It works well enough for passing tests. It does not work particularly well for the world those students are heading into.

The complex challenges facing today's professionals — whether they are building clean energy grids, developing software, or designing infrastructure — require people who can think across disciplines, connect ideas from multiple directions, and build things that actually work.

This is where STEM comes in. By connecting Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics through real-world problems rather than teaching each subject in isolation, STEM creates a way of learning that prepares students to actively find solutions rather than simply memorize them. And at the center of that approach, for Acellus students, is STEM-10.

What Makes a Good STEM Lesson

Not every class that calls itself STEM actually delivers on the promise. A true STEM lesson has a few things in common.

First, the connections between subjects are visible. Students should be able to see exactly how a math equation relates to an engineering problem, or how a science concept powers a piece of technology.

Second, students are asked to communicate their thinking in more than one way — through writing, presentations, visual design, or code. The modern workforce expects people to explain complex ideas across differ-

ent mediums, and students who practice that early arrive prepared.

Third, the problems are real. Abstract exercises lead to passive learning. When lessons are grounded in the kinds of challenges actual professionals face, students stay engaged because the stakes feel genuine.

And fourth, students build something. Theory alone is not enough. The moment a concept moves from a page to a physical object — a robot that responds to code, a circuit that lights up — something clicks that no amount of reading can produce.

Why STEM Matters Right Now

The numbers are worth knowing. STEM-based occupations are projected to grow at 8.1% between 2024 and 2034, compared to just 2.7% for non-STEM fields. Coding, software development, and information technology are growing even faster — projected at 15% in the same period.

For the generation currently going through school, understanding how technology works is no longer a resume booster or an optional elective. It is becoming as fundamental as

reading and writing. Acellus developed STEM-10 with that reality in mind.

What Is STEM-10

STEM-10 is a programming-based, ten-year curriculum designed to take students from their very first encounter with coding all the way through to specialization. It starts as early as third grade and is built so that each stage builds directly on the last.

One thing worth knowing for families considering enrolling: regardless of where a student is in their education, STEM-1 is the right place to begin. It is designed as the foundation the entire curriculum rests on, and every student — no matter their starting point — will find it a natural and rewarding entry into the world of coding. The curriculum moves through three stages.

STEM-1: The Beginning

It starts not with textbooks, but with robots.

Rather than introducing students to walls of code they have no context for,



STEM-1 puts interactive robots in their hands and asks them to make them move. Students learn the foundational building blocks of all software — sequences, loops, variables, and basic if then logic — by watching those concepts come to life in real time. If the command is right, the robot moves. If it is not, students figure out why.

That immediate feedback loop does something important. It removes the mystery from technology. Code stops being something intimidating and becomes a language students are already beginning to speak. By the end of STEM-1, they have the foundation they need to go further.



STEM-2: Going Deeper

In STEM-2, students are introduced to AC-D2 — a programmable dancing robot with around 10,000 possible step combinations, its own lights, and motors built to showcase its moves.

To control AC-D2, students learn JavaScript — a real, widely used coding language — and apply it to direct the robot's personality, choreog-

raphy, and movements. This is not a simplified version of coding. It is the actual language professionals use, introduced in a context that makes it engaging and immediately testable.

The feedback remains instant. If the code is wrong, the robot does not dance. That loop teaches students to slow down, pay attention to detail, and work through their own mistakes — habits that carry far beyond any single course.

STEM-3: Real-World Application

The final stage goes beneath the screen.

STEM-3 bridges software and hardware, asking students to understand not just how to write code but how that code connects to the physical world. Students learn the fundamentals of electrical engineering — voltage, the pressure that drives a current forward; current, the flow of electrons through a circuit; resistance, the friction that regulates it — and apply those concepts directly to their programming work.

By this point, students have spent years building on the same foundation. The connections between what they learned in STEM-1 and what they are doing now are visible. That continuity is the point.

At the end of STEM-3, students choose a specialized pathway based on

where their interests have taken them:

Web Architecture — for students drawn to front-end development, user interface design, and building the visual framework of the internet using HTML.

Apple Ecosystem — for students interested in developing apps for iPhone, iPad, and Mac using Swift, the native coding language of Apple products.

Global Software Engineering — for students focused on enterprise software, backend systems, and application development using Java.



A Note for Parents

If you are wondering whether STEM-10 is right for your child, the answer starts with a simple question: do you want them walking into the future prepared for it?

The careers being created right now — in technology, engineering, software, and beyond — belong to students who understand how things are built. STEM-10 does not just introduce those ideas. It gives students a decade to grow into them, one stage at a time, starting wherever they are. And it starts with something every student can do: making a robot move.

By the time an Acellus student completes STEM-10, they have spent years writing real code, debugging real problems, and learning how to think like builders. Not because someone told them STEM was important — but because they have been doing it since the beginning.



SCHOOLS THAT SHINE

ACELLUS® IN ACTION

A MONTANA RESERVATION SCHOOL DECIDED TO STOP WAITING FOR THE SYSTEM TO CHANGE

Inside the district that built a different path to graduation.

QUICK FACTS

SCHOOL

Poplar School District

LOCATION

Poplar, Montana — Fort Peck Indian Reservation

POWERED BY:

Acellus®

KEY CONTACTS:

Keith Erickson
Superintendent

Frank Gourneau
High School Principal

Poplar School District is in the far northeastern corner of Montana, on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. It is a small district. It serves a largely Native American student population. And for generations, the system it operated within was not built for them.

That is not an excuse. It is a fact that Superintendent Keith Erickson, now in his 28th year at Poplar, has spent his career trying to change.

"Native kids are always dropping out about 25% more than non-Native kids in Montana," Erickson says. "That's consistent. That's across the board. Every single year when you pull the data, it shows that Native kids aren't being as successful as non-Native kids in traditional schools. So obviously there's an issue there. There has been for forever."

He is not wrong. And he knows exactly why.

THE CHALLENGE

The barriers to graduation at Poplar do not start at the school door. They start at home — in houses marked by poverty, trauma, and instability that follow a student into the classroom whether the classroom is ready for them or not.

"Being on the reservation, there's another layer to that which is the generational trauma from the boarding school era that is still very real, and it continues to shape how some families view education today," says Frank Gourneau, Principal of Poplar High School. "For some, school hasn't always felt like a safe or welcoming place. We can't ignore that history or those realities."

The traditional model — show up, sit in a seat for 50 minutes, do it again six or seven times, go home — was built for a different student in a different world. For kids carrying real weight into a rigid structure, it was not just ineffective. It was a message. You don't fit here.



Keith Erickson
Superintendent



"I think those kids come to school, and there's too much stimulus," Erickson says. "They bring too much emotional trauma. They don't want to be told what to do. And so you stick them into a classroom where it's rigid — they work it."

Erickson has watched that play out for nearly three decades. He knows where it ends. Two minutes from the school, he says, there are people on the street right now — people he knows by name, people who were once sitting in those same desks — who dropped out and never found their way back. That is not an abstraction for him. It is the view from his window.

THE DECISION

He is not someone who jumps on new programs. He says so plainly.

"I'm not willing to jump on new things. I think a lot of them are worthless. But this one caught my eye. And that's why I'm sitting here today. I wouldn't be sitting here doing an interview if I didn't believe highly in how this program has really worked for our kids."

BY THE NUMBERS

Vectored Instruction Gains:
**20% IMPROVEMENT
 AMONG AT-RISK STUDENTS**

Graduation Rescue Rate:
**40% OF THIS YEAR'S
 GRADUATING CLASS**

What Acellus offered was something the old model never could — a way to meet students where they actually are. Work on your own schedule. Work at your own pace. Work from wherever life has you. The rigid seat-time requirement that had pushed so many Poplar students out the door got replaced by something much simpler: show progress, earn credit.

The shift changed what showing up meant. Students stopped coming because the calendar said to. They started coming because something was happening when they did.

"Instead of asking students to fit into a rigid system, we're creating a system that adapts to them," Gourneau says. "They're no longer just showing up because they have to. They're showing up because they can see that their effort is paying off."

Poplar launched its own district-run Cyberschool. Erickson says he would not have done it if he did not believe in the program.



THE RESULTS

The numbers are hard to argue with.

At-risk Native American students saw a 20% jump in performance through Vectored Instruction® — the part of Acellus that identifies learning gaps and quietly fills them without pulling a student aside or broadcasting their struggle to the room. At Poplar, that last part carries more weight than it might anywhere else.

"One of the biggest things Acellus and Vectored Instruction does is protect a student's dignity," Gourneau says. "Instead of pulling a student aside or making it obvious that they're struggling, the software identifies those gaps and

gives them the support they need in a way that's personalized to them. Students aren't labeled by what they can't do. They're working at their own level, building confidence instead of feeling embarrassed."

In a community where education has historically taken dignity away rather than built it, that is not a small thing. It is the whole thing.

For this year's graduating class, 40% of graduates would not have earned their Poplar diploma without Acellus. Twenty-three students who would never have finished crossed the stage because the program gave them a path that fits their lives.

One of them did it from inside a juvenile detention facility. She used Acellus to earn enough credits to graduate while incarcerated — completing the work from a place where, as Erickson puts it, the future looked about as bleak as it gets.

"She earned enough credits to graduate out of a juvenile facility," he says. "I can guarantee you the reversal of that would have been — comes to school, gets kicked out, drops out. But she did it."

What the program gave students that the old model never could was visibility. A progress bar moving, credits stacking up, a finish line coming into view — something that unlocked motivation that years of traditional schooling never had. Students who had stopped showing up started coming in on Sundays. Students who had been written off started setting goals.

"Every completed lesson, every credit earned, every milestone reached becomes something they accomplished

through their own effort," Gourneau says. "That builds confidence, and confidence builds momentum."

WHAT IT MEANS FOR POPLAR

The largest employer in Poplar is the local tribe. The tribe will not hire without a diploma.

For students who cycle through hard times — addiction, incarceration, poverty — and eventually pull themselves back, the diploma is the door. Without it, they get to the door and find it locked. The hope goes out before they ever get to knock.

"We see the cycle often," Erickson says. "They'll disappear, go through the drinking and the drugs, the hard times. And then they'll sober up, look to get a job. And what really stops them is not having a high school diploma."

For the students who would have become another number — another name the system failed — it gave the district something real. Something that shows up in the data and on the graduation stage.

"I can look back and say that was a really good choice," he says. "For some of our kids, I guarantee it — they won't stand a chance at getting a diploma without this. They would have dropped out and just been another number. But I can really strongly say that this is truly how some of our kids that would have never graduated are being successful."

For Erickson, this is what a meaningful career looks like. It's not about the students who would have succeeded anyway. It's about the ones who wouldn't have — and did.



Poplar Graduating Class of 2026

JOIN OUR TEAM

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

WORK AT THE HEART OF EDUCATION INNOVATION

The International Academy of Science is a mission-driven organization that believes every student deserves access to an excellent education. Our team is made up of educators, engineers, designers, and support professionals who share that belief and work every day to make it real. Working at IAS means working somewhere where the mission is the reason — not a paragraph in an employee handbook.

View a full list of open positions and apply at: kccareermakers.com/jobs/.

CURRENT OPEN POSITIONS

We offer competitive compensation, meaningful work, and the satisfaction of contributing to something that genuinely changes lives. We look forward to hearing from you.

ELECTRONICS MANUFACTURING APPRENTICE APPRENTICE, ENTRY-LEVEL, MANUAL LABOR, ON-SITE

As an Electronics Manufacturing Apprentice, you will receive structured on-the-job training, mentorship, and valuable real-world experience while building high-reliability electronic assemblies for cutting-edge applications.

FRONT END DEVELOPER ON-SITE

Build beautiful, easy-to-use applications and interfaces. Use HTML, CSS, JavaScript, and tools like React to create user-focused, high-performance web applications and work with a creative team on exciting projects.

CALL CENTER APPRENTICE SERVICE, ENTRY-LEVEL, ON-SITE

In this role, you'll receive hands on training in a customer service apprenticeship. You will provide encouragement, and resources to parents homeschooling their children.

GO DEVELOPER ON-SITE

Write fast, reliable backend code using Go. Build strong systems, handle big data smoothly, and help create powerful online tools with a talented team.

CALL CENTER REPRESENTATIVE CUSTOMER SERVICE, ON-SITE

In this role, you'll provide personalized guidance, encouragement, and resources to parents homeschooling their children through an innovative online learning program.

COURSE CATALOG

NEW & UPDATED

ELEMENTARY EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

NOW AVAILABLE ON THE ACELLUS LEARNING SYSTEM

Helping young learners name, understand, and manage their feelings

ABOUT THE COURSE

Every child experiences big feelings—joy on the playground, nervousness before a test, or frustration when a game doesn't go their way. Yet many children have never learned practical ways to understand and manage those emotions. The newest elementary elective from Acellus, Elementary Emotional Intelligence, helps fill that gap by equipping young learners with an age-appropriate vocabulary for their emotions and the tools to manage them effectively.

Built around the five core competencies of social-emotional learning—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—the course moves children steadily from simply noticing a feeling to understanding it, regulating it, and making good choices because of it. Through short videos, relatable stories, and interactive activities, students discover what emotions are, how feelings show up in the body, and how to name emotions like happiness, sadness, anger, and fear.

WHAT THE COURSE COVERS

The 171-lesson course unfolds across six carefully sequenced units. The first, *Introduction to Emotional Intelligence*, lays the foundation—defining emotional intelligence, introducing the five competencies, and showing how feelings appear in everyday life. From there, *Developing Self-Awareness* turns students inward to recognize their own emotions, celebrate personal strengths, reframe weaknesses as room to grow, and build confidence through journaling, art, music, and mindfulness.

COURSE DETAILS

COURSE TITLE

Elementary Emotional Intelligence

SUBJECT AREA

Social-Emotional Learning

GRADE LEVEL

Elementary (Grades 3–5)

LENGTH

Full Year · 171 Lessons

UNITS

6

SKILLS DEVELOPED

Identifying and naming emotions, self-awareness and personal reflection, self-management and calming strategies, empathy and social awareness, active listening and communication, teamwork and conflict resolution, goal-setting and motivation, responsible decision-making, and critical thinking.

The middle units put those insights into practice. *Mastering Self-Management* teaches calming strategies, stress relief, self-control, goal-setting, and the everyday routines that help children stay organized and motivated. *Building Social Awareness* shifts the focus outward, helping students see situations from another's point of view, show empathy and gratitude, and understand the rules and norms that help groups work well together.

The final units bring it all home. *Enhancing Relationship Skills* develops communication, active listening, teamwork, and peaceful conflict resolution—the skills that build and keep good friendships. *Practicing Responsible Decision-Making* ties the five competencies together, guiding students

through problem-solving steps, critical thinking, and weighing the consequences of their choices for themselves, their families, and their communities.



WHAT MAKES IT VALUABLE

Emotional intelligence is one of the strongest predictors of a child's success in school and in life, yet it is rarely taught directly. Elementary Emotional Intelligence gives Acellus students a structured, guided path through skills that are usually left to chance. Because the lessons are skills-based and practical, students do not just learn about emotions—they practice naming them, calming themselves, listening well, resolving disagreements, and making safe, thoughtful choices.

Every unit closes with a quick check, and progress is measured through lesson practice, unit exams, a mid-term, and a final—so students always know how far they have come and what comes next. By the end of the year, Acellus students are able to apply emotional intelligence to navigate the real challenges of growing up—building well-being, stronger relationships, and a genuine sense of belonging.



INSTRUCTOR SPOTLIGHT

Emotional Intelligence

Samantha Plum brings a warm, student-centered approach to Elementary Emotional Intelligence, grounded in a Bachelor of Science in Family Studies and a minor in Psychology from Weber State University. Her academic background in how children grow, learn, and relate to others shapes every lesson in the course.

Her experience spans career counseling, tutoring, and mentoring students of all ages—work that gave her a firsthand appreciation for how emotional skills help young people thrive. That blend of scholarship and genuine care for students comes through in a course designed to help children understand their feelings and build strong, healthy relationships.

WHAT CHANGES WHEN SCHOOL FINALLY FITS

Andrea Girk did not plan to pull her son out of school. The decision came on a Thursday in September 2023. By Friday morning, he was out.

He had been changing for a while — quieter, more resistant, fighting her every morning about going in. She could not figure out why until it all came to a head. The harassment he had been dealing with from other students had finally become too much. She pulled him and did not look back.

ONE SMALL WIN AT A TIME

What came next was harder than she expected. Not because Acellus was difficult to navigate, but because the real work of bringing a hurt kid back to learning does not happen overnight. It happens one day at a time, one conversation at a time, one small win at a time. For Girk, that meant rethinking everything — her schedule, her role, and what school could actually look like for her son.

THE FIRST HURDLE

The first challenge was logistical. Girk is a surgical assistant, which means her schedule runs around operating rooms, not school bells. She made it work — rearranging her days, planning around surgeries, and on the days she could not be home, bringing her son along. He has done his schoolwork from a hospital lounge more than once.



"I have to kind of work my schedule around surgeries," she says. "Even on surgery days, he's come up to the hospital and sat in the lounge to do his schoolwork."

When friends and family heard she was making the switch, the questions came fast. How are you going to balance everything? She did not have all the answers. She just knew she would figure it out.



REBUILDING CONFIDENCE

The harder challenge was her son's confidence. Years in a public school that had not served him well had left him doubting himself constantly. The first three or four weeks, the curriculum could not run itself. He needed her next to him.

"He struggled with confidence at first," she says. "He was just like, 'Well mom, I don't know if this is right. Can you walk me through it?' So the first probably three to four weeks, it was making time to sit down with him to just be present while he did his classwork."

Slowly, that changed. He built his own morning routine — got up, ate breakfast, played with the dog, and started his work. She stopped sitting beside him and started stepping back.

"Now I set back and I'm like, I know more than I did when he was in public school," she says. "I feel more present in his education."

SEEING HOW HE LEARNS

Being home showed her things she had never seen before. In public school, her son had spent hours at the kitchen table crying over homework while teachers labeled him as struggling without looking deeper. Sitting beside him every day, she started to understand why.

"I had no idea that my kid had ADD and OCD until we started and just watched him," she says. "Why he hated reading was because he would get everything mixed up and he wouldn't remember anything he just read. It opens your eyes when you get to see how your child learns."

Once she understood how he processed information, she could help him in ways the classroom never had. When a lesson moved too fast, she found a different way in. The flexibility that Acellus gave her son also gave her the room to actually parent his education — not just supervise it.



FINDING HIS THING

In Oklahoma, homeschoolers are required to log six hours of instruction per day. Trying to meet that through online classes alone, her son signed up for thirteen courses at once. It was too much. She redesigned the plan — blending his Acellus coursework with hands-on time in the shop.

He had taken the Acellus Investigating Careers class and come away with an unexpected interest: welding. A friend showed him the basics and he ran with it. Now he welds in the mornings and switches to schoolwork in the afternoons when the heat makes the shop too uncomfortable. School moves with him, not against him.



THE COMPLETE 180

When Girk first announced she was pulling her son from public school, friends and family warned her he would become isolated and unable to get scholarships. They told her she was making a mistake.

Three months later, they stopped saying that.

"We watched my child change into a confident kid," she says.

"He can talk to anybody — adults, kids. He loves going to shows and meeting people and meeting new welders. It has been phenomenal for him."

Now the same family members who questioned the decision are on board. Friends have switched their own kids to Acellus. And Girk says the only thing she regrets is not doing it sooner.

"Don't let fear deter you from opening up something for your child that no public school can touch."

LEARNING STRATEGIES

THE INSANITY OF CRAMMING

A QUALITY EDUCATION REQUIRES TIME AND EFFORT

By **Dr. Roger Billings**, *Acellus Chairman*

One of the great gifts of homeschooling is time. Freed from the rhythms of a crowded classroom, a family can let a child linger on a hard idea, revisit a concept until it clicks, and move at a pace that fits the learner rather than the calendar. Yet even in the home, the pressure to "keep up" can creep in. A child falls behind after an illness, a move, or a season of family upheaval. And confronted with that gap, many families reach for a strategy that feels logical but quietly undermines everything they are working toward: cramming.

Cramming — immersing a student in a single subject for hours on end, sometimes four or five hours a day — aims to compress weeks of material into a handful of intense sessions.

To the untrained eye it offers a seductive promise: a rapid return to the intended pace, a box checked, a problem solved. But beneath that appearance of efficiency lies a troubling truth. Cramming is not only ineffective — it actively undermines the very goals it seeks to achieve.

WHY CRAMMING FAILS

The appeal of cramming is rooted in its simplicity. When the school year seems to be slipping by, the urge to catch up can feel overwhelming. Cramming appears to deliver: a student finishes lessons, passes assessments, and completes the week's plan, creating the illusion of restored progress. But this surface-level success masks a deeper failure.

The human brain is not built to absorb and retain large amounts of information under compressed, high-pressure conditions. When students cram, they overload their working memory — the mental workspace where new information

is briefly held — leaving little room for the deeper processing that long-term retention requires. Cognitive load research shows that working memory can only manage a small number of new items at once. When a student is flooded with several lessons in one sitting, the brain simply cannot organize or encode the material well. The result is a fragile, superficial grasp of material that fades soon after the assessment, leaving the student no better prepared for what comes next.

Consider the child who memorizes a week of history overnight, only to forget it within days. That fleeting recall is not learning. It is a performance.

Research confirms this pattern. Two students prepare for the same history test. One studies key events over five days, a few topics per session. The other crams it all into one night. Both may do fine on a test the next morning — but within a week the crammer's recall collapses while the other student's holds firm. A landmark analysis synthesizing more than 250 studies on verbal recall confirmed that spaced practice consistently outperforms cramming for long-term memory. The reason is that the brain needs time to consolidate memories, strengthening the underlying connections with each spaced review. Cramming bypasses this process entirely, and rapid forgetting follows.

Cramming also creates what researchers call an illusion of mastery. After an intense session, a child may feel confident and do well on an immediate quiz — creating the impression that learning has taken root. Studies on mathematics instruction have shown that students who crammed



performed well on tests given shortly after, but their retention collapsed over time. Those who spaced their practice showed far better long-term recall, even when their initial performance looked less impressive. Think of it as hastily building a sandcastle — impressive for a moment, but without a sturdy base it collapses under the first wave.

Cramming also exacts an emotional toll. The relentless pace and sheer volume can bring on stress, anxiety, and exhaustion — especially for a child already struggling to regain footing. Under stress, the body releases cortisol, a hormone that research has shown directly disrupts memory consolidation and hampers the brain's ability to retain new information. This creates a self-defeating loop: the more a student crams, the more stressed they become, and the less they retain. A discouraged learner invests less effort in future study, widening the very gap cramming was meant to close.

A SMARTER APPROACH

If cramming is a desperate sprint, there is a smarter and more sustainable alternative.

Rather than immersing a child in one subject for hours at a time, consider mixing topics within a single study session — rotating among math, reading, and science rather than grinding through one subject until it is done.

This approach, which learning researchers call interleaving, consistently produces stronger long-term results than block studying or cramming. Studies comparing interleaved and blocked practice in mathematics found that students who mixed problem types not only scored higher on delayed tests but were also better at applying their skills to unfamiliar problems — a kind of transferable understanding that cramming never builds.

When a student jumps from one subject to another, the brain cannot coast on autopilot. It must retrieve the right approach each time, actively engaging with the material rather than passively absorbing it. That effort is what makes knowledge stick.

Research comparing students learning to identify painters' styles found that those who studied mixed works by different artists significantly outperformed peers who studied one artist at a time — even though the mixed approach felt harder in the moment. That pattern captures exactly why interleaving beats cramming: initial struggle yields superior results.

It also keeps students engaged. Hours hammering one subject drain motivation. Switching topics keeps the mind

fresh and the work more enjoyable — a practical benefit that any homeschooling parent who has watched a child hit a wall at the kitchen table will recognize immediately.

A few simple habits go a long way: rotating among subjects across the day rather than spending long stretches on one, revisiting older material alongside new work, and breaking longer sessions into shorter focused chunks with breaks in between. These are not complicated strategies. They are just how the brain actually learns.



It helps to think of it the way we think of nutrition. Just as the body thrives on a variety of nutrients in moderate portions, the brain flourishes on a mix of subjects and skills in manageable doses. Overloading on one subject leads to imbalance and fatigue. The right pace, like a well-rounded meal plan, provides the variety and the balance a growing mind needs.

THE CORTISOL LOOP

Stress triggers cortisol release, which directly disrupts memory consolidation. The more a student crams, the more stressed they become — and the less they retain.



and students using Acellus have shown marked improvements in academic performance compared with those using traditional methods.

The platform also gives parents real visibility. Detailed progress-tracking tools let a homeschooling parent monitor performance, spot areas needing attention, and adjust the plan — so you can guide your child effectively even in subjects outside your own expertise.

And because Acellus is available from any device with an internet connection, learning can happen at home, on the road, or wherever fits the family's life.

HOW ACELLUS HELPS

For families navigating this challenge, Acellus is designed to help students catch up — without cramming.

At the core of the platform is Vectors Instruction®, a system that continuously works to identify and fill each student's knowledge gaps. As a student progresses, Acellus assesses their understanding of each concept and adjusts accordingly.

When a student struggles, the system provides additional support until mastery is reached. When a student excels, it introduces more advanced material to keep them appropriately challenged.

Research supports the effectiveness of this approach. A U.S. Department of Education report highlighted the potential of adaptive learning technologies to improve outcomes through personalization and timely feedback —

A FINAL THOUGHT

Cramming is less a solution than a surrender — a grasp at short-term results that sacrifices long-term growth. Real learning asks for more: time to breathe, space to connect ideas, and strategies that work with the brain rather than against it. As a homeschooling parent, you already hold the greatest advantage in your child's education — the freedom to go at the right pace rather than the fastest one. By embracing a balanced approach and leaning on tools like Acellus, you can move beyond the insanity of cramming toward stronger retention, sharper thinking, and a child who genuinely knows the material.

That is the promise of a quality education. And it is well within reach at your own kitchen table.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

- More than 250 studies confirm spaced practice consistently outperforms cramming for long-term memory retention.
- Students who crammed performed well immediately — but retention collapsed over time.
- Interleaved learners scored higher on delayed tests and applied skills better to new problems.



Dr. Roger Billings

Acellus Chairman



OPPORTUNITIES TO GET INVOLVED INITIATIVES OF ACELLUS

ACELLUS ACADEMY

Acellus Academy is a fully accredited online school serving K–12 students who need a flexible, personalized alternative to traditional education. Using the full Acellus curriculum, students learn at their own pace through engaging video-based lessons taught by qualified instructors.

With features like Vectored Instruction®, Acellus identifies learning gaps and provides targeted support to help students achieve mastery before moving forward. Parents can easily monitor progress, while students have the freedom to learn from anywhere — whether at home, traveling, or balancing unique schedules and opportunities.

Acellus is ideal for families seeking a rigorous home-based education option, including students with medical needs, performance athletes, and those in rural areas with limited course access. Acellus students have gone on to earn college scholarships, complete dual enrollment programs, and graduate early.

Enrollment is open year-round. To learn more, visit [AcellusAcademy.com](https://www.AcellusAcademy.com) or [Acellus.com](https://www.Acellus.com), or call (866) 684-6127 to speak with an enrollment advisor.

ACELLUS FOR SCHOOLS

CLASSROOM-READY IMPLEMENTATION

Acellus equips public and private schools with a flexible, standards-aligned platform designed for in-classroom and blended learning. Schools use it for core instruction, intervention, credit recovery, special education, gifted programs, or STEM — integrating seamlessly without disrupting schedules.

When your school signs up, you can expect:

- Fast Onboarding — Quick setup, staff training, and dedicated support.
- Flexible Classroom Models — Including Gold Spark, the popular 40/20 blended model (40 minutes adaptive digital instruction + 20 minutes teacher-led collaboration and higher-order activities).
- Teacher Empowerment — Real-time dashboards and automated tools that free educators to focus on mentoring and instruction.
- Proven Outcomes — Strong gains in engagement, mastery, and test scores across diverse populations. Acellus complements strong teaching, helping schools differentiate instruction and keep every student on track for graduation.

To learn more, contact partnerships@Acellus.com or visit <https://www.Acellus.com/schools/>.



UNLOCKING COLLEGE SCHOLARSHIPS

Strategies for turning high school choices into scholarship aid – a guide for Acellus juniors and seniors

Emily was a senior at Acellus Academy with big aspirations for her future. Located in Georgia, she was interested in attending Emory University, a private university ranked number one in her state and #24 nationally with acceptance rates ranging from 10% - 14%. However, the cost of attending such a prestigious institution is prohibitive.

Emily was accepted to Emory on a full-tuition scholarship, valued at \$88,000 per year. She achieved this without athletic recruitment, state championships, or national performing arts competitions. Her award was merit-based and qualifying came down to deliberate choices during her high school years.

In today's competitive college landscape, merit scholarships often make the difference between attending a dream school and facing significant debt. At Acellus Academy, we've seen students strategically position themselves for life-changing awards.

The student's name has been changed for privacy; the scholarship outcome and details are factual.

How Merit Scholarships Work

Merit aid is different from need-based financial aid. Need-based aid is determined by a family's financial situation. Merit aid is awarded based entirely on what a student has achieved, including their GPA, their test scores, and the strength of their coursework.

Many public universities make this straightforward



through guaranteed scholarship grids. These are published charts that show exactly how much aid a student can receive based on where their GPA and test scores intersect.

Annual scholarship by GPA and ACT

GPA/ACT	22-23	25-27	28-30	31-33	34+
3.9 - 4.0	\$4,000	\$8,000	\$14,000	\$20,000	Full tuition
3.7 - 3.89	\$3,000	\$6,000	\$10,000	\$16,000	\$22,000
3.5 - 3.69	\$2,000	\$4,000	\$7,000	\$12,000	\$16,000
3.0 - 3.49	—	\$2,000	\$4,000	\$7,000	\$10,000

An illustrative annual merit grid based on common public-university structures. Seemingly small increments move a student into a substantially higher dollar tier.

Based on the collective insight from numerous college applications, there are three persistent factors that can significantly influence the amount of merit aid that students qualify for, each of which are directly controlled by students. In this article, we break each of them down.

1) Course Rigor

For the purposes of GPA calculation, many colleges weight coursework based on the rigor of the course. A

standard core high school course may receive up to 4.0 grade points, while an advanced AP course may result in up to 5.0 grade points.

For this reason, a student with perfect grades in a standard course load may not be viewed as favorably as a student with decent grades who has consistently pushed themselves with harder coursework.

Here are three ways students can build a rigorous course load:

Advanced Placement (AP) Classes — College-level coursework taken in high school. Strong scores on the corresponding AP exams can earn transferable college credits, giving students a head start before they even arrive on campus.

Honors Courses — Faster-paced and more in-depth than standard tracks, honors classes are typically weighted in a way that strengthens a student's GPA profile while demonstrating genuine academic challenge.

Dual Enrollment — Actual college courses, taken in partnership with a local university or community college, that count for transferable collegiate credit.

In addition to impacting GPA, taking a rigorous course load is one of the best ways to score well on college entrance exams and prepare for collegiate studies.

2) ACT/SAT Scores

In terms of merit scholarship aid, scores on the ACT or SAT are often where students can gain the most ground the fastest.

The ACT and SAT measure math, reading comprehension, and problem-solving. A student who prepares seriously, through practice exams, prep courses, or workbooks, can move up a full scholarship tier.



Here are five tips that families should know:

- **Know which test fits your student.** The ACT and SAT are different exams that favor different strengths. Identify which one your student scores higher on and focus preparation there.

SOLID MERIT

26-29

ACT

1240 - 1390 SAT

Mid-tier scholarships at most public flagships

STRONG MERIT

30-32

ACT

1400 - 1490 SAT

Major awards open up at most state universities

TOP-TIER MERIT

33+

ACT

1500+ SAT

Full tuition or full ride at many institutions

Approximate ranges. Exact dollar tiers vary by institution. Always check each school's published criteria.



- **Test-optional does not mean test-blind.** Submitting a strong score can unlock funding that a student without a score simply does not receive.
- **Super scoring works in your favor.** Many universities take a student's highest score from each section across multiple test dates and combine them into a new composite. Retaking the exam almost always helps.
- **Timing matters.** Juniors should establish a baseline score now and leave time to retest in the fall of senior year. For seniors, the early autumn test dates are often the last opportunity to raise scores before scholarship deadlines close.

across four years tells a story: a student who figured things out and kept climbing. A downward one raises real questions in scholarship review. And senior grades still count. Colleges request final transcripts after graduation, and both admission offers and scholarships can be rescinded after a weak senior year. The finish line is not the acceptance letter.

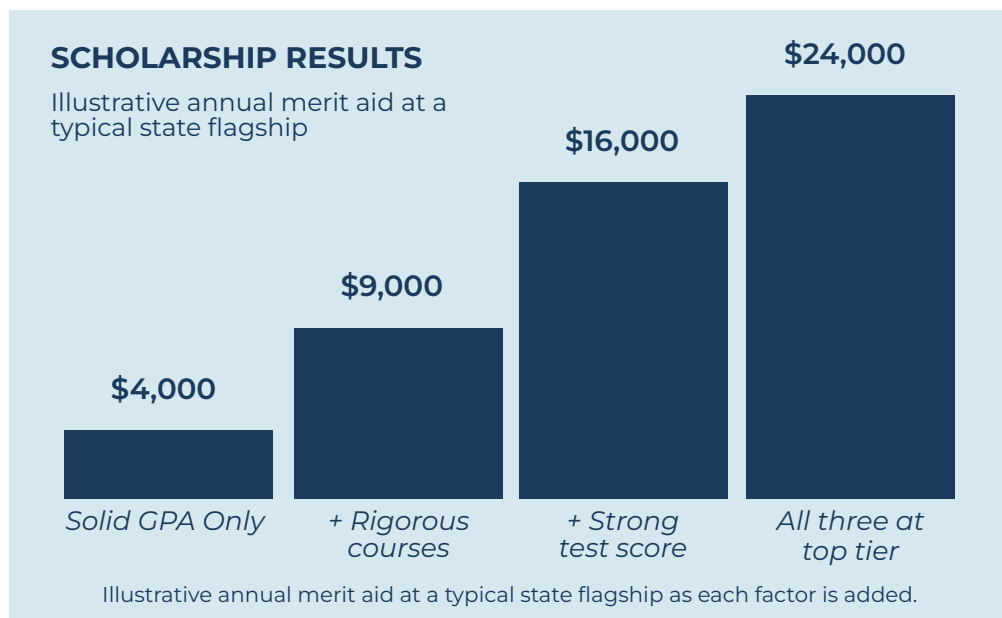
The Three Factors Compound

Each factor multiplies the others. A solid GPA alone earns a modest award. Add rigorous courses and the award grows. Add a strong test score and the student moves into the top tiers of nearly every scholarship grid.

3) GPA

Cumulative GPA matters more than any single semester. It is the slowest factor to move, which is exactly why it rewards students who start early and stay consistent. A senior-year push cannot undo three years of low grades. The students who reach the top scholarship tiers are usually the ones who treated freshman year like it counted, because it did. It pays off to study hard.

Trajectory matters as much as the number. An upward trend



Action Steps By Grade

Scholarships are rarely won by actions taken in the senior year alone. They are built across four years of decisions, and the three of the biggest factors are the ones the student can control: the courses they choose, the scores they earn, and the grades they keep.

In conclusion, here are steps that juniors and seniors can be taking to maximize scholarship opportunities. Study hard – your future depends on it.

Dr. Joshua Billings

Executive Director, Acellus Academy



FOR JUNIORS

The preparation year

- Lock in a rigorous senior schedule now.
- Take the ACT or SAT this spring; plan a fall retake.
- Build a list of 8–10 schools; pull their merit grids.
- Improve and maintain your GPA. Study hard!

FOR SENIORS

The execution year

- Apply early. Many merit awards are first-come, first-served.
- Take one more test sitting if there's room to grow.
- Protect senior-year grades.
- Apply for departmental and outside scholarships.

This article is provided for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal, financial, or academic advice. The scholarship grids, examples, and strategies presented are illustrative only; actual merit aid policies, award amounts, and eligibility criteria vary significantly by institution and are subject to change at any time. Students and families should verify all information directly with the admissions and financial aid offices of the colleges and universities they are considering.

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