The Three Questions Jermaine Gassaway Asks Before Handing a Struggling Reader a New Book

Jermaine Gassaway explains the diagnostic routine he built as a school leader for matching struggling readers to books that actually move them forward.

Charlotte, North Carolina Nov 9, 2026 (Issuewire.com) - A struggling reader does not need more books. They need the right book, at the right level, at the right moment. Jermaine Gassaway learned this as a classroom teacher and later refined it as a school principal, where more than half of his student population came in performing below grade level.

"Handing a child a book they cannot read, or one that bores them, teaches them that reading is a chore," Gassaway says. "The goal is to find the one book that makes them forget they are practicing."

That belief shaped a routine he still describes to teachers and parents today: three questions, asked in order, before any book gets placed in a student's hands.

Question One: What Does the Data Actually Say?

Gassaway starts with assessment data, not assumption. As a principal, he used NWEA assessment results to track exactly where each student stood, not just against a grade-level average, but against their own starting point months earlier.

"A score tells you where a child is today," he says. "It does not tell you where they started or how far they have already come. You need both numbers before you pick anything for them to read."

This is why he pushed for Tier 2 reading interventions built around individual growth data rather than a single grade-level cutoff. Students performing below grade level were not treated as a single group. Each got a starting point and a target tied to their own trajectory.

Question Two: What Does This Child Actually Care About?

Data narrows the reading level. It does not pick the book. Gassaway's second question is about interest, not metrics.

"A ten-year-old who loves basketball will push through a book about a point guard before they will push through a book about nothing they care about, even if the reading level is identical," he says. "Interest is what gets a kid to page fifty. Level is just what gets them through page one."

He treats this as a matching problem, not a reading problem. The right book sits at the intersection of what a child can read and what a child wants to read. Miss either side, and the book stays closed.

Question Three: What Is the Next Small Win?

The third question is about pacing. Gassaway does not ask teachers to chase a full grade level of growth in a single book. He asks them to identify the next small, visible win.

"Growth happens in small steps that a child can feel," he says. "A student who finishes a book two weeks faster than the last one knows something changed in them. That feeling is what keeps them

opening the next book."

This is consistent with how he describes the broader goal of education: progress measured in increments a student can recognize, not only in year-end scores. At the school he led in Nashville, students working with special education support and multilingual learners averaged well over a year and a half of growth in reading within a single semester, tracked the same way, one small win building into the next.

A Routine, Not a One-Time Fix

Gassaway is clear that this is not a program or a checklist to post on a wall. It is a habit of attention: check the data, find the interest, set the next small target, then repeat it for the next book.

"None of this is complicated," he says. "It just takes someone willing to ask the same three questions every time, instead of guessing once and moving on."

He connects the routine directly to the argument running through his book, *Unopened Books: Multiplying the 2%*: that a student's relationship with reading is built book by book, often by an adult who took the time to notice what that specific child needed next.

"Every unopened book in a classroom is a missed match, not a lost cause," Gassaway says. "The work is finding the right one before a student decides reading is not for them."

To read more, visit the website here.

About Jermaine Gassaway

Jermaine Gassaway is a Superintendent at Movement Schools, based in Charlotte, North Carolina. He is the author of *Unopened Books: Multiplying the 2%* and *When You Arrive: A Children's Book About Racism*, and has spent his career working to close opportunity gaps in public education, from the classroom to school leadership.

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