There Are No Shortcuts: How an inner-city teacher--winner of the American Teacher Award--inspires his students and challenges us to rethink the way we educate our children

Awesome Book, Awesome Person!

The banner in Rafe Esquith’s classroom at Hobart Elementary School reads: “There are no shortcuts.” And his students are a testament to the power of that philosophy. These are kids who speak English as a second language, fourth--and fifth--graders who go to school in a part of Los Angeles where violence and despair are the norms of the neighborhood.

But the statistics are not what you’d expect: Esquith’s students score in the country’s top 10 percent on standardized tests and go on to colleges such as Harvard, Princeton, University of Chicago, Swarthmore, Stanford, and UCLA. How do they do it?

Esquith’s view—that learning isn't easy and that it shouldn't be—is an increasingly unusual take among educators. Success, he believes, comes from a strong work ethic and from dedication and perseverance on the part of children, teachers, and parents alike. But such ideas prove to be a hard sell to those who believe that hard work and fun must be mutually exclusive. On the other hand, visitors from all over the world have made a pilgrimage to this astonishing classroom.
Esquith’s students work hard. They are in the classroom at 6:30 a.m. and stay until 5:00 p.m. They come to school during their vacations. Each year the Hobart Shakespeareans, as Esquith’s students are known, perform one of the Bard’s plays—Sir Ian McKellen and Hal Holbrook are passionate patrons. These Renaissance children are outstanding mathematicians and scientists; they read Steinbeck and Malcolm X; they are artists; they play classical music and blistering rock n roll. Above all, they are recognized for their impeccable manners, which serve them well as Esquith accompanies them all over the United States. They are, as many observers have commented, the gold standard in American education.

His former students in middle and high school return on Saturdays, where they read Ibsen, Chekhov, and eight Shakespeare plays a year. In their “Wake Up with Will” program, these eager youngsters travel the world with Esquith and his wife, from London to Paris to colleges all over the country. It’s a classroom where the American Dream really does come true.

There have been no shortcuts for Rafe Esquith, either. He had to learn the hard way: dealing with bureaucratic administrators, antagonistic colleagues, and his own impetuous and occasionally tactless, even confrontational, nature. But his history, peppered with funny and painful incidents, and a gallery of incisive portraits—Miss Mothball, Miss Busy-As-a-Bee, Mr. Incompetent—explains his extraordinary success as a teacher.

His scathing yet loving view from the front lines is the most trenchant look at American education to appear in many years. It’s a full-alert warning signal, an inspiration, and a guide for teachers, parents, and all the rest of us who care about our country’s children.

My Personal Review:
As a teacher, I highly recommend Rafe’s first book. His life story is truly inspiring and encouraging for those of us in the trenches of the classroom. I think it is a mistake to criticize his way of life or dedication, but rather look at your own situation, and see what you can learn from his experience. For instance, I applied his economic system (discussed in detail in the book) and my students loved it and learned so much from it.

On a personal note, Rafe, as busy as he is, has always taken the time to try and answer my questions regarding teaching. He truly practices what he preaches, Be Nice, Work Hard. He came at the right time in life, when I
was wondering whether I had chosen the wrong profession. My wife noticed how he helped change my attitude. This man has dedicated his life to improving education, his student lives and now teachers lives, as he travels the country speaking and writing. He puts the proceeds from his books into his classrooms non-profit group, which pays for student trips, etc. So by purchasing the book, you are not just helping him, but are helping the kids he teaches in the poor sections of L.A.
Thank you.

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