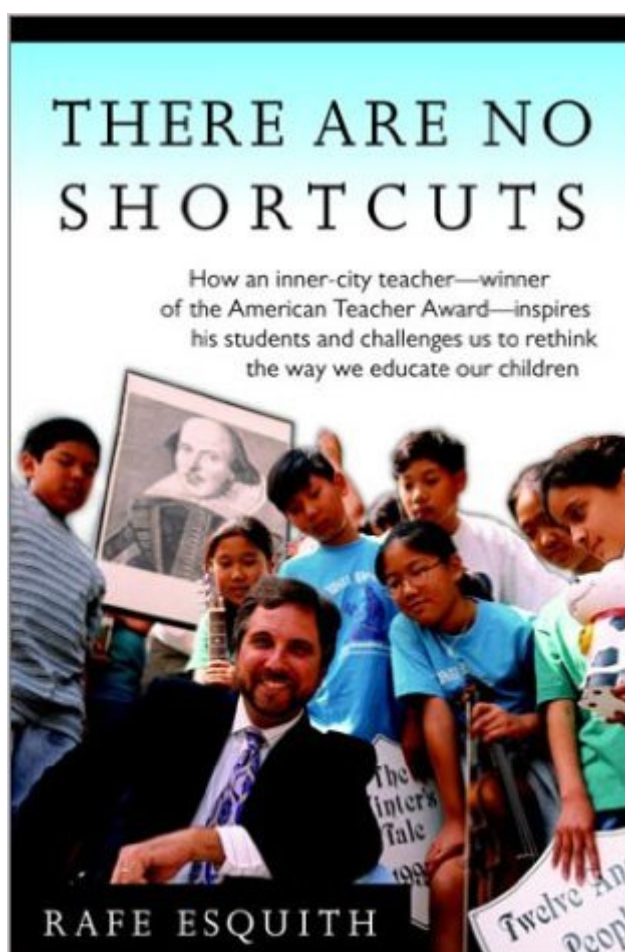


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There Are No Shortcuts: How An Inner-city Teacher--winner Of The American Teacher Award--inspires His Students And Challenges Us To Rethink The Way We Educate Our Children



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

After I saw a documentary about Rafe Esquith, I decided to read "There Are No Shortcuts," in which this unique educator gives his perspective on the rewards, challenges, and disappointments of teaching in a Los Angeles public school. Esquith has two decades under his belt fighting entrenched bureaucrats who prefer conformity to individuality. During his years in Hobart Elementary School, he has taught inner-city children Shakespeare and other works of classic literature as well as advanced mathematics and music. In addition, he has given his students the skills and the confidence to achieve more than they ever dreamed was possible. All of this comes at a price. Esquith almost went bankrupt paying for the materials that he needed to support his curriculum, and he ended up in the hospital after putting in long hours with little sleep. He still works from dawn to dusk, as well as on Saturdays and school holidays, but he attempts to avoid burnout by occasionally taking some time off to relax with his family. One of Esquith's mottos is "work hard, be nice." He certainly works hard, but he is not always nice in his criticism of the educational establishment. He skewers incompetent and indifferent teachers and administrators, ridicules irrational and obstructive rules and regulations, and even has a few harsh words for his own union, which he has supported over the years. Anything or anyone who prevents an educator from doing whatever he can to bring out the best in every student gets thumbs down from Esquith.

I ran into this book at a used book store five hours ago and have been reading it since, rapt. I had never heard of this guy, but since I am becoming a teacher I found his insider account of finding

success in a tough school intriguing. And the book is never boring. Also, I'm sure many of the kids he taught benefited from his passion, creativity, fundraising abilities and personal largesse with his time and (modest) income. Honestly, though, the guy is a nut. At one point he takes the older kids on a 31-day tour of 25 college campuses?!?! Is that really necessary? Useful? Wouldn't three or four have sufficed? At another point he is working crappy second, third and fourth jobs to buy presents for the kids and take them on trips. When a father is shot in the neck, he practically moves in with the wife and daughter -- and then is surprised when he doesn't get a thank you note ... maybe he inspired some jealousy?! He stares down murderers, takes on LA Unified any chance he gets -- by the end I was waiting for him to drive up the stairs on a motorcycle like Jim Belushi in "The Principal." After all, he's teaching at what he describes as "The Jungle" (which seems a bit extreme a name for even the roughest K-5!) The guy's martyr/megalomania level is off the charts. He so desperately needs to be these kids' uber-father figure, it's genuinely scary. And despite the occasional bone he throws other teachers, he is very clear that NOBODY is even in his league as a teacher. Plus, he has set up his class where his kids are constantly performing to public acclaim, which then reflects back on the director. Furthermore, he glosses over so many issues to make his story sexier.

Rafe Esquivel has an amazing classroom going in California. Here he gives some episodes and advice for young teachers seeking to build off of his success. Rafe transitioned from an elite district to an underprivileged elementary school and struggled to reconcile doing all for his students with overcoming district resistance. He does not mince words on his dislike for administrators. He's pretty transparent with his personal flaws. Many teachers spend out of their own pockets to help their students. Rafe admits taking this to extreme and self-destructive levels with his desires to take kids on class trips. Eventually he stresses himself out to the point where he endangers his students and he takes a much needed break to recharge. Like most teacher books, Rafe's deep attachments to his students comes through. Most of the time, his relationships lead to challenging his students to positively go beyond their expectations and exceed their potential. Rafe also shares a couple of episodes where students took advantage of him and how he's learned to set more appropriate boundaries for necessary self-preservation. Ultimately, Rafe's classroom takes off and he gains support of famous Shakespearean actors and the trust of his students. He puts in gargantuan hours but his students rise to the challenge and succeed academically and eventually go on to professional success. He develops some very creative systems such as classroom currency to motivate students. I also applaud him for establishing a real classroom community where past

students actively participate in after school and before school hours.

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