

Education *Matters*

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Teaching as Leadership

6 traits of highly effective teachers

By Jamie Davies O'Leary

Although viewpoints on how to reform American public education are numerous and discordant, they tend to converge on one key premise: teachers matter. *A lot.*

Unfortunately, the consensus stops there. What characteristics do excellent teachers share? How do we measure these traits?

What precisely do teachers do in the classroom that makes such a difference?

All-Star Teachers

Who knows what makes for a great teacher? Maybe Teach For America (TFA) does. In its new book, *Teaching as Leadership: The Highly Effective Teacher's Guide to Closing the Achievement Gap*, authored by TFA's vice president for knowledge development and public engagement, Steven Farr,

TFA has captured two decades' worth of findings on 17,000 teachers to answer this simple question:



What distinguishes an all-star teacher from the rest?

We learn that six traits characterize highly effective teachers:

1. **Set goals that are ambitious, specific, and measurable.** This is also known within the TFA community as BHAG (“big, hairy, audacious goals”). Hairy is right—one NYC principal’s request that teachers outline their goals for students recently prompted the United Federation of Teachers to file a grievance.
2. **Invest in students and their families.** Teach For America doesn’t have a monopoly on this; however, TFA may be unique in the extent to which its teachers will do nearly anything (dye their hair, shave their heads, pay for field trips out of their pockets) to motivate their pupils to learn.
3. **Plan purposefully.** When you’re an amateur with a tough assignment, deliberate planning is one of the only ways to prevent the crashing and burning that haunts every new teacher. Such deliberateness prevents misbehavior from erupting during transitions and ensures that students are spending every second of their time on task.
4. **Execute effectively.** TFA realizes that execution requires a dose of humility to recognize when a lesson is failing, to not take things personally, and to be so committed to the students that you can recognize the slightest wrinkle of confusion on a child’s face during a lesson or a subtle act of disinvestment, and make changes accordingly.
5. **Increase effectiveness continuously.** Farr points out that when observing TFA’s most effective teachers, it’s common to hear apologies from them that the class is in the midst of dramatically changing its management system, restructuring guided reading groups, etc. In other words, the only thing these teachers are tied to is never being tied to anything.
6. **Work relentlessly.** Some traits of highly effective teaching are harder to develop than others. The fuel driving TFAers to work long hours, face failure daily, not only write high expectations on a classroom poster but also truly believe that children performing years behind grade level can leave their class achieving at high levels, comes from an internal locus that even TFA has a difficult time quantifying.

Why does any of this matter? For starters, lessons from TFA appear to be inspiring President Obama’s and Secretary Duncan’s focus on “effectiveness” (versus No Child Left Behind’s emphasis on “highly qualified” teachers). The idea is written into Race to the Top, and stands behind the four turnaround strategies of School Improvement Grants, especially the “turnaround” option, which focuses on major staffing changes in schools. Instead of evaluating teachers by what they did (e.g., certification or college courses), the administration wants to evaluate them on what they do (using student achievement metrics).

Still, when it comes to understanding the “squishier” traits of excellent teachers (such as grit and perseverance) and figuring out how to recruit and develop talent, there is a dearth of solid research. TFA’s work helps fill that void and others are jumping on the bandwagon, too. Bill and Melinda Gates are pouring big bucks into the Measure of Effective Teaching project, an initiative that observes and surveys 3,700 teachers in six cities through 2011. It hopes to inform teacher evaluation through videotaping teachers, among other things, to capture, analyze, and learn from effective and not-so-effective teaching.



With a nearly twenty-year-old organizational commitment to data collection, research, and measuring value-added student growth, it’s fair to say that Teach For America is ahead of the game. Its findings add urgency to our pursuit of better evidence on excellent teachers, and inspire hope that a new consensus—one that doesn’t just stop at the vague admission that teachers matter—may well be within reach. ■



O’Leary, a policy analyst in Fordham’s Columbus, Ohio, office, is a Teach For America Camden, NJ 2005 corps alumna. This article first appeared in The Education Gadfly, a publication of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

Special-Needs Scholarships Save Money

Investing in schooling reduces costs of litigation

By Jim Waters

A report released late last year by the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy notes Florida has experienced a significant drop in requests for and actual number of due-process hearings since it implemented the McKay Scholarship Program, which began as a pilot program for special-needs students in Sarasota and has grown to include more than 19,000 students statewide.

Between the 2003-04 and 2007-08 school years, requests for due-process hearings concerning tuition assistance grants (TAG) in the Sunshine State dropped by nearly one-fourth, and “fully adjudicated due-process hearings” fell by 87 percent during the same period, said report author William Hurd.

“One of the great advantages of this grant program is that it allows parents and school systems to do away with all that dissension and to use more money for education and less money on litigation,” Hurd said in a conference call with reporters on his report, “Legal Consequences of a Tuition Assistance Grant Program for Students with Disabilities.”

Enhancing Parental Rights

Five states—Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Ohio, and Utah—have implemented state scholarship programs that make it easier for parents to get access to funds that give them access to schools that meet their children’s needs.

In his report, Hurd, a former Virginia solicitor general who devotes much of his current legal practice to representing families of special-needs children, seeks to bolster the case for bills proposed in Virginia over the past few years that would allow parents a \$10,000 grant to obtain the education and services that best fit their families’ needs.

Hurd argues in his report that a state-

funded program offers easier access to—if a more limited amount of—funds than the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Plus, “parental rights are enhanced” by offering parents a choice between a state-run program or the IDEA.

Bringing Legislation

A leading legislative proponent for such grants in Virginia has been state Sen. Walter Stosch (R-Henrico), who since 2006 has repeatedly filed bills to create them. Some of his bills would include all children, others restricted TAGs to children diagnosed with autism. The economic arguments offered in opposition to Stosch’s legislation—such as that it would drain much-needed funds from public schools—were countered in a 2007 study by the Institute, which concluded that a special-needs scholarship program would not only not harm public schools, but it would actually give them a small windfall for each student.

Even though local districts would lose about \$5,000 in state funding per child, they also would lose the expenses associated with providing services for the child while retaining other federal and local revenue streams.

Answering Objections

Hurd uses rigorous data and offers common sense resolutions to counter a strategy by public school officials and the Virginia Education Association intended to sway lawmakers against Stosch’s bills.

Opponents claim, for example, parents could abuse the system by deciding midway through the school year to switch their child from the private school, which has already received the grant funding, back to a public school that would be obligated to accept the child and provide services.

That’s easy to solve, Hurd said, by requiring parents that choose this route to repay the grant on a prorated basis, or divide the grant payments into installments between the two semesters. If TAG opponents were really concerned about mid-year transfers back to the public school system, he said, they would seek to amend Stosch’s bill, not kill it altogether.

“I’ve gone through the legal objections to this program,” Hurd said. “All are really without merit.”

Losing Parents

The federal IDEA, created thirty-five years ago, was meant to give parents of special-needs students more access to schools and services. However, its bureaucratic hurdles have made appealing school decisions concerning placement of special-needs children a foreboding process.

“Life has given these parents an extra set of challenges. The school system shouldn’t add more to it,” said Judith “Tessie” Wilson, a member of the Board of Education of Fairfax County, Virginia, since 2000, who has the unique perspective of being both the parent of a special-needs child and a school board member.

In the forward to Hurd’s report, Wilson wrote that no one looks forward to a “clash of wills—from local [Individual Educational Placement] meetings to due process and even to the courtroom” that can sometimes occur when parents and schools disagree. Parents who request IEP hearings usually lose to the school districts, which have significant resources, experts, and attorneys.

According to the Virginia Department of Education, hearing officers ruled against parents in 82 percent of cases between July 1, 2007 and June 30, 2009. Some Virginia school districts have even shown a willingness to spend profligately to defend themselves against parents’ claims. The Hanover County district recently was ordered to pay parents of an autistic child more than \$330,000 in tuition reimbursement and attorneys fees in a four-year-old case that ended up costing the district more than twenty times the tuition in question. That sort of decision in favor of parents happens rarely. More often, participating in a fully adjudicated hearing means parents must risk losing and recouping none of their costs. ■



Jim Waters is director of policy and communications at the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Bowling Green, Kentucky. This article first appeared in School Reform News, March 2010, a publication of The Heartland Institute.



Real Stinkers

By Mike Antonucci

The Education Intelligence Agency's "Public Education Quotes of the Decade"

It takes a special statement to become the *EIA Communiqué* Quote of the Week, and a singular one to be included as one of the Quotes of the

Year. So you can imagine how difficult it was to choose the Quotes of the Decade. I found it impossible to chop it down to ten, so here are the fifteen most memorable quotes:

15. "What would we really do differently if we really did listen to our members? First, we would very rarely, if ever again, give a cent to a politician or a political party."

Former Ohio Education Association Executive Director Robert Barkley, giving his farewell speech at OEA's Representative Assembly in December 2000.

14. "You deserve a President who understands what I'm about to say."

U.S. Senator John Kerry, during a July 16, 2004, speech at the American Federation of Teachers convention in Washington, D.C.

13. "While building efficiencies of scale might fit a sound business model, it is the antithesis of sound educational practice."

Hawaii State Teachers Association Vice President Joan Lewis (November 1, 2005, Honolulu Advertiser)

12. "Folks, we're in trouble. If we were in private business, we'd be out of business."

Kenneth Burnley, chief executive officer of the Detroit Public Schools. (April 6, 2001, Detroit News)

11. "You shouldn't be angry about how much teachers get paid, but how little money most everyone else makes."

Portland Oregonian columnist S. Renee Mitchell (February 27, 2006, Oregonian)

10. "When the scores go up, it's not just meaningless. It's worrisome."

Alfie Kohn (October 18, 2008, Salt Lake Tribune)

9. "A man without vision might as well be blind."

A delegate to the NEA Representative Assembly, debating NBI 14, which dealt with the state of art and music education in America's public schools. (July 3, 2006, NEA Representative Assembly)



8. "If they don't agree to everything I want, we will be in impasse."

United Teachers of Dade President Pat Tornillo, describing his approach to emergency labor negotiations with the Miami-Dade County School Board. (January 16, 2002, Miami Herald)

7. "We expect parents to work in the best interest of the kids. We're working in the best interest of the teachers."

Hudson (Ohio) Education Association President David Spohn (October 9, 2003, Akron Beacon Journal)

6. "The inventory of items seized from the downtown Washington apartment of Barbara Bullock on Dec. 19 reads like the manifest of a pirate ship, firearms and all."

Washington City Paper reporter David Morton, describing the situation at the Washington Teachers Union under former President Barbara Bullock, in his cover story, "Membership Has Its Privileges." (January 24-30, 2003, Washington City Paper)

5. "What worries me at the moment are the unintended effects of this 'choice' agenda. The government is keen to give parents choice over which school their children attend. So lots of people are no longer sending their children to local schools. That has led to more and more children going by car instead of walking and we know that lower levels of physical activity can lead to obesity."

Roger Mackett, University College, London. (January 16, 2009, London Daily Telegraph)



4. "Black people can be gullible."

Andre J. Hornsby, president of the National Alliance of Black School Educators, offering his explanation for the high rate of African-American support for school choice. (May 30, 2001, Education Week)

3. "What happened on the plantation when the slaves had enough?"

Baltimore Teachers Union President Marietta English, unhappy with the district's contract proposal (April 25, 2007, Baltimore Sun)



2. “People take money every day for things I would not do... there are people that are paid to be assassins. Sometimes it’s just not worth the sacrifice you would have to make for the money.”

Metro Nashville Education Association President Jamye Merritt, explaining why her union opposes performance pay (January 7, 2007, Tennessean)

But for an unmatched combination of hyperbole, metaphor, and faulty history, there can be only one **Public Education Quote of the Decade:**

1. “The struggle in which we are engaged is as vital to our future today as was the outcome of the Civil War to our nation in 1860 (*sic*). The goal of these locusts is to impose their will on state after state until they have completely demolished government as we know it. There is a time for every generation to rise to the call—when the very existence of our nation, our state, our values, our culture, and our public schools is threatened with extinction.”

Nebraska State Education Association Executive Director Jim Griess on Initiative 423, a ballot measure that would have limited state government spending to previous years’ amounts, with allowed increases for inflation and population growth. (October 2006, The NSEA Voice)



Snow Laughing Matter

**R.I.P. snow days.
Viva virtual learning!**



The mid-Atlantic may have lost electric power, its dignity, and a week of workdays when the white fluffy stuff blanketed the region in early February. But it didn’t lose learning time, at least for some students with enterprising teachers. Using Internet chats and document uploading Web sites, teachers across the Washington, D.C. area were able to keep their students’ gray matter oscillating through telecommunication.

One teacher observed that the “quality is even better” online because students “have a little more time to think about [their responses]” to discussion questions. State achievement, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate test dates often cannot be changed, so losing as much as a week and a half of class time (as they did in Prince George’s County) can have serious deleterious effects on learning. (Snow-day learning loss is, in fact, a documented phenomenon.)

Although power outages and Internet access limitations caused a few problems, for the most part, teachers and students were pleased with the productive use of their homebound days. When classes started up again, the teacher commented, “We just picked up...as though the snow had never happened.” That’s good news, indeed.

Source—The Education Gadfly, Thomas B. Fordham Institute



Indiana Introduces Sweeping Changes for Teacher Licensing

In January, an Indiana state panel that supervises teacher licensing successfully swept aside many of the state’s more arcane rules governing teacher certification. These are remnants of the Hoosier State’s “Sue-Ellen” era which her replacement, Tony Bennett, the new superintendent of schools, is determined to change.

The new policies mirror National Council on Teacher Quality’s (NCTQ) recommendations for states seeking to modernize their rules.

From now on, teacher candidates in

Indiana will only be allowed to major in education if the education school’s content requirements meet or exceed the content requirements of a subject major that non-teachers on that same campus must pursue. Bennett also attempted to sharply curtail the amount of professional coursework an education school could require, but his rather untenable proposal of only fifteen to eighteen credits of professional coursework went down with a thud.

The new regulations signal a dramatic end to the state’s long-held

distaste for alternate routes. Now, teacher candidates with a baccalaureate degree in any subject can receive a license by taking an education minor (roughly fifteen credit hours) and passing a content-knowledge test. This new provision will make it much easier for districts to hire so-called “profession changers.”

Source—Teacher Quality Bulletin, an electronic publication of National Council on Teacher Quality.



Science • Technology • Engineering • Mathematics

Tomorrow's Inventors and Innovators

Survey Shows Need for Creative Activities,
Strong Educators, and Mentors

The nation is hoping for a bright future. Many believe the key to strengthening the U.S. economy and competing globally lies in fostering an innovative culture and educating America's youth in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). According to this year's Lemelson-MIT Invention Index, an annual survey that gauges American perceptions about invention and innovation, teens are enthusiastic about these subjects, with 77 percent interested in pursuing a STEM career.

Hands-On Learning Approach Needed

The positive findings of this year's survey come on the heels of President Obama's introduction of Educate to Innovate, a campaign designed to increase interest and improve performance of U.S. students in STEM. The focus of Educate to Innovate is on hands-on activities outside the classroom, which the Lemelson-MIT Invention Index revealed is one of the most effective ways to engage youth ages 12 through 17.

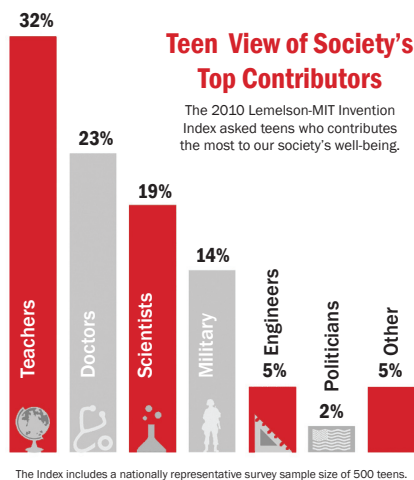
Teens listed activities such as field trips to places where they can learn about STEM (66 percent) and access to places outside the classroom where they can build things and conduct experiments (53 percent) as the best ways to get them interested in these subjects. Highlighting the need for nontraditional learning regardless of setting, two-thirds of teens chose hands-on individual projects and hands-on group projects as the types of classroom-based educational methods they enjoy most. These findings align with recent reported trends on an increasing interest in tinkering and hands-on work.

"Increasing teen exposure to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics through hands-on activities will result in a more positive perception of these important subjects," said Leigh Estabrooks, invention education officer with the Lemelson-MIT Program, a nonprofit organization that recognizes outstanding inventors and inspires young people to pursue creative lives and careers through innovation. "It's encouraging that the White House and large corporations are taking a vested interest in these fields of education. Supporting teens and giving them the resources to pursue these fields are vital."

Power of Teachers

The survey also found that while in the classroom, educators play a powerful role in exciting teens about STEM, more than half of teens (55 percent) would be more interested in STEM simply by having teachers who enjoy the subjects they teach. The 2009 Lemelson-MIT Invention Index also found that mentorship is important to teen motivations; 43 percent said that role models in STEM fields would increase their interest in learning about these areas.

An overwhelming number of respondents wish they knew more about STEM in order to create or invent something (85 percent); however, a majority might be discouraged from pursuing STEM professions due to a lack of understanding of the subjects or what people in these fields do, and not knowing anyone who works in these fields (51 percent). In addition, with less than one-fifth of respondents feeling scientists contribute most to society's well-being, and even fewer selecting engineers (5 percent), many teens may lack a full understanding of the societal impact that STEM professionals have, further highlighting the need for teachers and mentors in these areas.



Fostering Future Innovators

The Lemelson-MIT InvenTeam initiative is one way teens can get direct access to hands-on learning and STEM professionals. InvenTeams are teams of high school students, teachers, and mentors that receive grants up to \$10,000 each to invent technological solutions to real-world problems.

Joshua Schuler, executive director of the Lemelson-MIT Program, says, "De-



More than half of teens (55 percent) would be more interested in STEM simply by having teachers who enjoy the subjects they teach.

spite the need for more hands-on educational programs, it's encouraging to know that today's teens do have aspirations to invent and innovate. Schools and companies need to continue to facilitate access to STEM tools and mentors, and encourage teens to pursue their inventive passions." Schuler adds, "Introducing students to STEM at a young age helps them connect the dots between everyday invention and careers that can improve society and the U.S. economy."

The Lemelson-MIT Program

The Lemelson-MIT Program recognizes the outstanding inventors and innovators transforming our world, and inspires young people to pursue creative lives and careers through innovation.

Jerome H. Lemelson, one of U.S. history's most prolific inventors, and his wife Dorothy, founded the Lemelson-MIT Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1994. It is funded by The Lemelson Foundation and administered by the School of Engineering. It has donated or committed more than \$150 million in support of its mission to improve lives through invention in the U.S. and developing countries. ■

For more information, please visit <http://www.lemelson.org>.



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