

# Education Matters

October 2010

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## LESSONS FROM THE FRONTLINES OF THE CHARTER SCHOOL MOVEMENT



Moving from the ivory tower to actual classrooms causes one think tank to go back to the drawing board.

By Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Terry Ryan

In Fordham's customary role as a bumptious ed-reform think tank and advocacy shop, it's unusual for it to engage in the real work of transforming schools and educating children. But our home state of Ohio has blessed us with many opportunities to get down and dirty in real-world education-reform struggles affecting real kids in a real place. Not the least of those opportunities has been our sobering, eye-opening work as an authorizer of charter schools in the Buckeye State.

"Humbling" might be a better term for this experience. One of our sponsored schools imploded in a fashion worthy of a Greek tragedy. Just a few years ago, the W.E.B. Dubois Academy in Cincinnati was visited by the then governor, lauded in the U.S. Senate as a praiseworthy example of a school narrowing achievement gaps, and cited in a Seattle newspaper as a prime example of why Washington State voters should approve a charter school measure then on the ballot. But fast forward a few years and the school's dynamic founder was pleading guilty to five counts of theft in connection with charges that he misused school funds and services to improve his home. The school he founded was closed—for weak academic performance—just last month.

And that painful saga is just the tip of our experiential iceberg in Ohio, where we've learned the hard way that think-tankers don't always fare well in the rough and tumble of politics, organizational interests, and human frailty. Expert theories don't always hold water either, and the ivory tower perspective doesn't necessarily translate into real gains for schools and children.

We examine these lessons in *Ohio's Education Reform Challenges: Lessons from the Frontlines*. This new book recounts our efforts to re-

## We have no patience with those who insist that “society must change” before schools can be expected to accomplish more for poor kids.

form urban education on the ground, beginning in Dayton; to help launch new schools; to fix broken older schools; to assist needy families to make their way into better education options; and to duke it out with powerful institutional resistances, reform-averse politicians, and adult interests bent on maintaining the status quo.

### Charter School Evolution

A main thread through this story is the evolution of charter schooling in Ohio, home to four of the nation’s top ten charter cities. This form of school choice has been fought over since 1997. Every year, more bills and regulations have been proposed to reshape Ohio’s charter program. Some measures would strengthen it; others, stunt it. Charter-school policy in the Buckeye State today resembles a multilayered archeological site with relics from many past civilizations heaped atop one another.

Ohio is one of just two states where nonprofit organizations like ours may sponsor charter schools, Minnesota is the other. Sponsorship—a.k.a. authorizing—is probably the least understood element of the charter world. How outfits such as ours function in that capacity is unmapped terrain. Much of this book chronicles why we became a sponsor and what we’ve encountered in this role since 2005.

Yet there’s more to this story than charter schools. It is also a saga of school reform—and the prospects for economic renewal—in a key state in America’s old industrial heartland, and in a once-proud city now buffeted by profound economic, demographic, and social changes. Dayton and Ohio are struggling on multiple fronts, but nowhere more visibly than on K-12 education. And nothing is more crucial to their revitalization than transforming the quality of their human capital, the performance of their schools, and the vibrancy of their neighborhoods.

The issues, of course, transcend Ohio and speak to how America is dealing with the twenty-first century; issues of governmental competence and institutional effectiveness, public and private interests, economic renewal and international competitiveness, social justice and equality of opportunity, and, of course, the efficacy of academic standards and school choice as education renewal strategies.

In the book’s concluding chapter, we share a number of lessons distilled from our work in Ohio and beyond. Here are some of the most compelling:

**1** Placing a “charter” sign over a schoolhouse door doesn’t guarantee educational excellence. Indeed, that designation doesn’t guarantee much of anything except a public educational institution with the opportunity to be different.

**2** Risks need to be taken and changes embraced. Encouraging innovation, choice, and experimentation in K-12 education entails obvious perils—and we fell victim to more than a few of them. But when barely half the kids in many U.S. cities even graduate from high school, risks need to be taken. The status quo is simply unacceptable.

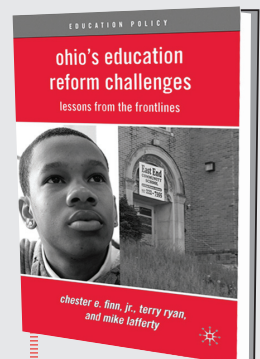
**3** Really good schools make a big difference, particularly for poor youngsters whose life prospects need a boost beyond what their families and neighborhoods can supply. We have no patience with those who insist that “society must change” before schools can be expected to accomplish more for poor kids.

# Troubled School

Adapted from Chester E. Finn, Jr., Terry Ryan, and Michael B. Lafferty, *Ohio’s Education Reform Challenges: Lessons from the Front Lines*, Palgrave MacMillan Publishers (June 2010).

**T**he Moraine Community School had struggled since opening in 2002, but surely it was worth trying to rehabilitate. The charter represented this Dayton suburb’s only public school. Moraine was a General Motors industrial town, and many of its families were connected to the GM plant that had once made Frigidaires and later built SUVs. (The last vehicle rolled off its assembly line on December 23, 2008. The sprawling factory is now dark.)

Before the charter opened, all Moraine students were bused to schools in the nearby suburbs of Kettering and West Carrollton. Many felt like strangers there, and they and their parents longed for a neighborhood school of



“A brutally honest account of charter school reform in Ohio—a fast-paced narrative full of fascinating insights gained from real experience. I wish I could have read this book my first year as Governor.”  
—Bob Taft, Governor of Ohio 1999-2007

**4** The education marketplace doesn't work as well as we thought—or as some of our favorite theories and theorists assert. It's supposed to result in parents selecting high-performing schools for their children while shunning low performers. In practice, atrocious schools can languish for years, fully enrolled. There must be a balance between a school's accountability to the parent marketplace and its obligations to sponsors and other external monitors that focus on its educational effectiveness.

**5** Reformers and innovators tend to evolve into their own vested interests with turf and jobs to protect. In the blink of an eye, it sometimes feels, zealous agents of change become defenders of the new status quo, greedy for money, resistant to accountability, hostile to competition, averse to further change. The "education establishment" turns out to be a big tent—with a doorway that appears to open in only one direction. ■



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**A lesson on what happens when investors and stakeholders don't share the same goals**

their own. For that reason, the Moraine charter originally enjoyed the support of community leaders and served about 200 children in grades K–12. Almost from the start, however, the school encountered serious governance, leadership, financial, and academic difficulties. Moraine Community School was in Academic Emergency for two years prior to Fordham sponsorship, and its board and principal had gone through a nasty split just before we took over. A serious leadership vacuum remained.

Our sponsorship agreement made clear that we expected it to improve markedly—and fast. Its board assented. According to our contract, the school would show:

- Adequate academic gains from autumn 2005 to spring 2006, as measured on a national norm-referenced test
- Market demand by enrolling at least 225 students by April 2006
- Compliance with all special-education requirements by October 2005
- Implementation of a viable curriculum by February 2006

As the February deadline approached, we received a letter from the school's board president stating, "Our one-year sponsorship agreement had renewal terms that we likely won't meet. There was an opportunity to secure 2006/2007 sponsorship through the Cincinnati-based ERCO (Education Resource Consultants of Ohio)."

With those words, Fordham learned, the Moraine school was fleeing our tough-love embrace. We had thought its leaders were game to making the hard decisions needed to render their school effective. We were wrong, and they spurned us for a less-demanding sponsor. What's more, under Ohio law, the school was within its legal rights to "sponsor hop" when

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its leaders realized we were serious about holding them to account for improving their school.

Two years later, the Moraine school and three others (with no Fordham sponsorship connections) would be sued by then-Ohio Attorney General Marc Dann, citing a failure to educate children.

In hindsight, we were naïve about the Moraine school and our ability to turn it around through tough love. No matter how much we wanted the school to succeed academically, those in charge—the school leadership and teachers—did not have the capacity to make it perform at a high level. Even more important, we gradually realized that the school's leadership did not see their primary mission as delivering academic success to children.

For them, the goal was to provide a place that cared for the community's children with love, respect, and understanding. If learning also occurred, well and good, but the school's very existence was a sufficient end in itself for both the board and many parents. It was, quite simply, "their" school. Our efforts to inject a sense of urgency and focus on academic results just did not fly. That we didn't share the same values should have been obvious from the start, but we failed to see it. ■



# A Heart

## Louisiana's 2010 Teacher of the Year

AAE recently met with Holly Boffy, Louisiana's 2010 State Teacher of the Year, at an event in Baton Rouge. Holly is a member of the Association of Professional Louisiana Educators (A+PEL), a state partner of AAE, and she shared some of her experiences as an educator.

**AAE:** *Thank you for taking time to talk with us. For many of our members, teaching is more than just their profession, it's a lifelong calling. When did you know that you wanted to be a teacher?*

**Holly:** I always knew I was going to be an educator. A 5x7 inch black plaque with gold writing made me want to become a teacher. When I was a child, it was posthumously awarded to my grandfather who was a teacher, coach, principal, and superintendent. It hung to the left of my grandmother's door all my life. As I grew up I was constantly reminded that he was a hero to almost everyone I loved, and that made him my hero as well.

Education is my calling, and fortunately I was raised in a family that holds the profession in high regard. My paternal grandparents were both educators, and many more teachers fill the branches of my family tree.

**AAE:** *Wow! That is an impressive educational heritage. Aside from your family's influence, what about the education profession appealed to you?*

**Holly:** I became a teacher because I want my life to matter. The profession offers limitless opportunities for me to make a difference in the lives of my students, and for me to continue growing as a teacher. Careful reflection makes me realize that my greatest accomplishments are the impressions I leave on the lives of students.

Growing up, I was always told I could do and be anything I wanted, but no one ever showed me how. I teach my students how to make their dreams come true. I teach them the difference between understanding concepts and memorizing information. I teach my students how to think, research, and communicate. I do not just disseminate information; I help students learn how to learn.

**AAE:** *In order to have an impact, teachers have to manage classrooms full of students with very different abilities. How do you manage this challenge?*

**Holly:** The first step in managing different ability levels is recognizing student's strengths and weaknesses. I utilize differentiated instruction. I sometimes differentiate based on student abilities,

but social studies most often lends itself to differentiation based on interests and learning styles.

**AAE:** *How do you make learning fun for your students?*

**Holly:** Students respond well to novelty, so I vary my teaching techniques as often as possible. They enjoy and respond well to lessons involving music. I also integrate technology as often as possible, and the most effective way to do that is to put technology in the students' hands.

**AAE:** *What is your best tip or trick for engaging students?*

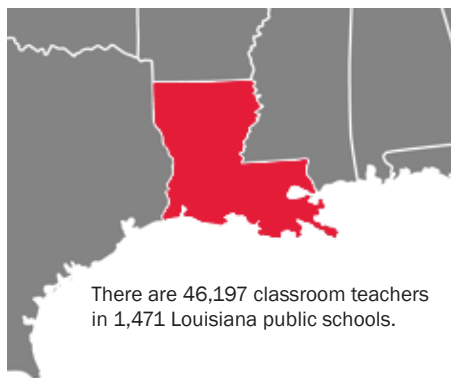
**Holly:** The best way to engage students is to make the learning experience personal. I try to get to know my students' interests and incorporate their interests when possible.

**AAE:** *In your opinion, what is the biggest challenge that teachers face today?*

**Holly:** Teachers are not given enough time to plan, provide feedback to students, research and implement best practices, or

# It for Students

## Year shares her passion for impacting students



reflect on their progress with students. Teachers need more time!

**AAE:** *If you could change one thing about the current education system, what would it be?*

**Holly:** If I could change one thing about the current system, it would be its structure. Students would be better served if they were allowed to move to the next level as they master skills as opposed to on an annual rotation.

The current system tries to prepare all students for the same future and is failing too many children in the process. Instead of focusing on making all students the same, schools need to focus on helping students realize their potential. Our system needs to be more fluid.

**AAE:** *What is the best piece of advice about teaching that you have ever received?*

**Holly:** That is hard to answer. In my first year, my custodian could tell I was staying late, working real hard, and frustrated with my progress. He encouraged me by saying something to the effect of, "You only need to make a difference in one child's life in order to be a successful teacher." I remember tears coming to my eyes as he spoke because I realized he was right. When I get frustrated, I try to

refocus my attention on my students and help them one at a time.

**AAE:** *Looking back, what do you wish now that you had known before you became a teacher?*

**Holly:** I wish that I had known that I should not be the busiest person in the classroom. Teachers need to create engaging learning experiences, then get out of the way and let students learn.

**AAE:** *Many AAE members are at the beginning of their careers as educators. What advice would you give to a new teacher?*

**Holly:** Stay focused on your students. Paperwork and policies can be frustrating, but when you get overwhelmed, just focus on the students. Figure out what they need and do what you can to help them make progress.

I became distracted this year and started to lose focus. A simple technique, inspired by Dr. John Hodge, president of Urban Learning and Leadership Center, got me back on track. I started shaking my students' hands as they walked through the classroom door each day. This reminded me to stay focused on them.

**AAE:** *You are different than many teachers because you are not a member of a teachers' union. Instead, you are a member of the Association of Louisiana Professional Educators (A+PEL), which is the independent educator association in your state. What made you decide to join A+PEL?*

**Holly:** I grew up hearing my grandmother talk about my grandfather's union going on strike while she was expecting her second child. This left the family with no income, and so my grandmother had to move in with her parents. It was a very

difficult time for them, and their experience gave me a negative impression of unions.

A+PEL was presented to me as a professional organization with insurance benefits while I was a student at Louisiana State University. I didn't hesitate to sign up and have been a proud member ever since because of A+PEL's commitment to improving the field. A+PEL consistently supports efforts to improve the quality of education for Louisiana's students.

**AAE:** *Thank you for talking with us. We are always proud to support educators like you who are committed first and foremost to teaching children.* ■

*Holly earned her B.A. and M.A. in Elementary Education from Louisiana State University, and has been a teacher in the public school system for nine years. For the last seven years, she has taught 8th grade gifted social studies at Paul Breaux Middle School in Lafayette, Louisiana. When she is not teaching, Holly spends her time caring for her three-year-old son, Pierce, and spending time with her husband, Carrick. They recently organized a benefit fishing rodeo, Fishing for Memories, for the Alzheimer's Association in honor of Carrick's grandfather.*

### Holly's Advice

- Make your life matter
- Treat students as individuals
- Keep your techniques novel
- Make learning personal
- Stay focused on your students



# the necessity and practicality of Procedures in the Classroom

By Jill Newell

**“I start teaching next Thursday for the PE class! I thought you’d be excited for me 😊” texted my 20-year-old cousin.**

My first feeling for her—excitement. My second feeling for her—concern. “I AM excited for you!” I responded. “How long will you be teaching? Have they helped you set your rules and procedures?”

Her first experience in the classroom has so much in store for her. But just how well are her instructors preparing her for this experience, I wondered? They couldn’t possibly let her loose in the classroom with just her enthusiasm to teach and a few discipline theories in her head. Luckily, my impression was correct, and my level of concern dropped significantly as she responded with “We’ll teach five times and yeah they’ve stressed classroom management ridiculously and we’ve practiced a lot with each other...”

It makes me quite happy to know that in her school of education the aspiring teachers are lead by instructors who seem to understand the importance of stressing classroom management.

Teachers with strong classroom management skills are often seen to be a cut above the rest. There is something highly professional about a teacher who knows how to work a class instead of the class working the teacher. They are masters of their own little universe. Of course, every teacher has strengths and weaknesses within a classroom management system. But when a teacher pays attention to the strengths and weaknesses in his or her

system, it only benefits the students. For me, daily procedures are my forté and I play to that strength as much as possible.

Procedures are basically sacrosanct in my classroom; I cannot run it without them. In fact, one of my favorite aspects of the new school year is sitting down to assess my classroom procedures.

I question, “What worked last year?” “What didn’t work?” “What did other teachers do well?” “What should I avoid?” And the over-arching question is always “How do I want my classroom to run?” Like clockwork.

To me, the ideal classroom has a productive hum to it, like a beloved luxury sedan. From that vision, I base my classroom procedures. Realistically it rarely runs perfectly, but it works well for me, and more importantly for the students. When they know what to do, chaos rarely ensues.

## For Example

My favorite procedure in the classroom I stole from Mrs. L—the hand-raising procedure. It was genius to me. It’s a straight arm in the air with one, two, three, four or five fingers extended. Each one represented something that a student needed:

- 👉 finger: *I have a question*
- 👌 fingers: *I’d like to use the restroom*
- ✋ fingers: *I’d like to sharpen my pencil*
- 👋 fingers: *I’d like a drink of water*
- 👏 fingers: *I have a comment*

Some teachers have said to me “It’s too much to remember” or “The kids will never follow through.” All I can say is that it works for me. We practice at the beginning of the year (a lot). The students learn it and they use it. I even quiz them throughout the year about what each finger represents. Is it perfect? No. But it certainly keeps an unneeded conversation from interrupting instruction time.

If you like this idea, use it. If you like it but want to tweak it, be my guest.

## The Big Idea

The big idea here is to be aware of what you do. Recognize your established classroom procedures and recognize where you need to establish them. Ask yourself, “How do I want my classroom to run?” From that vision you create your procedures. Remember, it won’t run perfectly—we’re dealing with imperfect humans, ourselves and the students—but with a few tweaks you’ll soon have your procedures running your students instead of the students running you.

Do you think that I can fit all of these thoughts into a text message response to my cousin? ■



*Jill Newell is the manager of professional development and communications at the Association of American Educators. She taught English at the secondary level in suburban Utah and inner-city Southern California.*

*Currently, she teaches Spanish at Northern Virginia Community College to fulfill her desire to be in the classroom with students.*

# WAITING FOR “SUPERMAN”

## New documentary exposes the crippling affects of unions

*Waiting for “Superman”* is an exploration of the current state of public education in the United States and how it is affecting children. Academy Award-winning director, Davis Guggenheim, sets off on a probing journey into the lives of five unforgettable kids whose dreams, hopes, and untapped potential reveal all that is at stake at this critical moment.

They include Daisy, a Los Angeles fifth-grader who, no matter what, never gives up on big plans for her future; Francisco, a Bronx first-grader whose mom will do anything to give him a shot at a better life; Anthony, a Washington, D.C. fifth-grader in search of a different life from that of the dad he lost to drug addiction; Emily, an eighth-grader in Silicon Valley who fears being permanently stamped as unfit for college; and Bianca, a Harlem kindergartner already aiming, with her single mother’s valiant help, to make it against the odds.

In spite of their rousing determination and grit, the shocking reality is that most of the film’s touching and funny cast of kids will be barred from a chance at what was once taken for granted: a great American education.

Despite the fact that it only debuted in New York and Los Angeles, the movie performed extremely well.

On the heels of major mainstream media coverage, “*Superman*” outperformed estimates and is on its way to becoming a major nationwide success.

Oprah dedicated two full hours of programming to the film with guests ranging from New Jersey Governor Chris Christie to music star John Legend. It’s clear that



In “*Waiting for ‘Superman,’*” Daisy, an East Los Angeles 5th grader, dreams of being a doctor. She lives in a neighborhood where an average of six in ten students don’t graduate from high school.

—Courtesy of Paramount Pictures

the film is affecting a broad audience and not just the same policy-oriented reformers.



Davis Guggenheim received an Academy Award for his previous documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*.

On Oprah’s show, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced a donation of \$100 million dollars to reform Newark, New Jersey’s failing schools. The announcement coincided with the film’s opening

and has been pegged as the beginning of a new epicenter of education reform and a model for the rest of the country championed by the New Jersey governor and the mayor of Newark, Cory Booker.

Guggenheim’s film about global warming created a firestorm of controversy and legislative action. Only time will tell if the same will ring true with education reform and his current project. *Waiting for “Superman”* is certainly on track to become a full-fledged movement in its own right, while reinvigorating the reform agenda nationwide. Teacher unions are front and center as blocking the kinds of reforms crucial to bringing children a better education.

“*Waiting for ‘Superman’* has brought the state of education in America into full focus, and as a result, an important dialogue has begun,” said Gary Beckner, Executive Director of the Association of American Educators. “Teachers are stakeholders in education; therefore, AAE encourages all of our members to see the movie and be part of this dialogue.” ■



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