

EDUCATION MATTERS

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New Study:

Boosting the Quality and Efficiency of Special Education

BOOSTING THE QUALITY AND EFFICIENCY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

by Nathan Levenson

Foreword by Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Michael J. Petrilli

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THOMAS B.
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ADVANCING EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

A new study of 1,411 public school districts finds that reducing special education personnel in high-spending districts to the national median would save—or free up for redeployment—\$10 billion nationally each year while also boosting educational outcomes for special needs students. Using the largest and most detailed database of U.S. special education spending ever built, *Boosting the Quality and Efficiency of Special Education* found that the majority of the money goes for staffing but that there is wide variance in how districts staff for special education—and in their outcomes for children with special needs.

At a time when school budgets are being squeezed from many directions, special education consumes a growing share of district spending. Yet too few students with special needs achieve academic proficiency. To address this reality, Nate Levenson, managing director at the District Management Council and a former public school superintendent, analyzed spending and staffing patterns in 43

“...districts that spend less on special education often produce better academic outcomes for special needs youngsters than do their higher-spending counterparts.”

percent of all U.S. school systems enrolling more than three thousand students, identifying trends and patterns in how those districts spend on special education. Using pairs of demographically similar districts from Florida, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Ohio, and Texas, Levenson shows that districts that spend less on special education often produce better academic outcomes for special needs youngsters than do their higher-spending counterparts.

Based on this pioneering analysis, Levenson outlines five clear steps to improve the outcomes and efficiency of American special education:

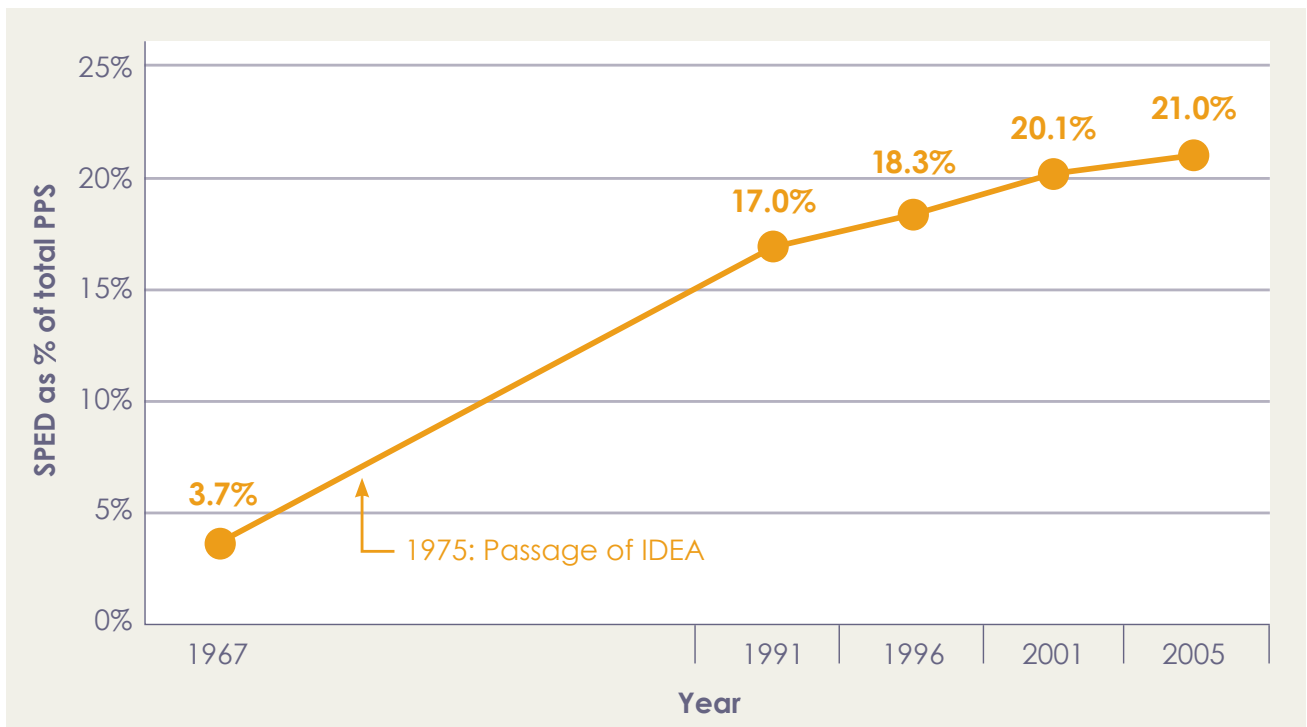
1. Employ more effective general education and special education teachers at the district level—not just more of them or more nonteachers (i.e., aides).
2. Manage pupil loads for special education teachers carefully.

3. End federal “maintenance of effort” requirements that prohibit states and districts from reducing spending on special education.
4. Preserve the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) subgroup accountability and reporting requirements, including those that pertain to students with special needs.
5. Permit greater flexibility in the use of federal special-education (IDEA) funds.

“Special education spending can’t be exempt from efforts to improve educational outcomes and efficiency,” said Fordham Institute President Chester E. Finn, Jr. “Kids with special needs deserve better and districts literally can’t afford not to do better.” ■

The chart from the Boosting the Quality and Efficiency of Special Education, page 9

Figure 1: Special Education as % of Total per Pupil Spending*



* Average, including overhead allocation, of nine districts studied by Alonso and Rothstein.¹⁰

The Constitution Reader

Teachers, are you interested in a great new resource for your social studies or history classes? The Constitution Reader is a free, interactive, searchable, and customizable website centered around The U.S. Constitution: A Reader. It contains the same material taught in the Hillsdale College's core course on the Constitution. In addition to containing a fully digitized and searchable version of the Reader, The Constitution Reader also contains:

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Purposeful Learning with Modern Technologies

I have read with interest the recent *Education Matters* articles that have both encouraged and questioned the use of modern technologies (i.e., mobile devices) in the classroom. This particular dialectic resonates with me, a fourteen-year experienced teacher who teaches secondary students social studies using rich primary source documents as points of departure for thinking deeply about the past. In this space, I intend to explore just one affordance that I believe supports the increased use of technology: establishing purposeful learning.

Many, perhaps most, would agree that learners tend to be more successful when they are engaged with what they believe is purposeful—that the content and skills they are learning are truly worth the time and effort learners are asked to expend. Increasingly more often I find that employing technology, especially web-based hypermedia, better establishes purpose for secondary students than do paper hard copies alone.

Modern technologies have made some older forms and methods of teaching seem needlessly wasteful of our effort and perhaps our most valuable resource, time. For example, where resources are available, why assign students to flip through several books and graphic organizers when they can effortlessly toggle back-and-forth between several trustworthy websites? Paper fatigue notwithstanding, the time and effort saved in this example alone are enough for many to embrace technology.

My experiences also suggest that using technology to promote purposeful learning is as much prag-



matic as it is educative. Twenty-first century students are accustomed to learning from text and images emerging from computer screens. Technology is certainly here to stay, and we teachers should, at the very least, attempt to forge an understanding of their best uses. As with previous generations who negotiated the advent of VCRs and DVD players, teachers who find themselves awash in modern technologies may be wise to recognize that iPads, tablet PCs, SmartPhones, and the like are simply means to an end. In short, they are tools, and tools are only as effective as those who employ and operate them.

Technology can also help teachers establish purpose by authentically situating learning in the real world, particularly when nested in an inquiry-based approach. The use of technology may help students become more genuinely committed to deep, sustained focus as they work

to answer the query well.

Those of us who believe that knowledge is constructed, as opposed to transmitted, may conclude that students must be challenged to negotiate multiple truth-claims and that no individual learner alone can perceive the complexity of social reality. Again, technology can facilitate students' discourse and deliberation as they reason together about the world around them. Skype, Twitter, Google's Social Circles, and, of course, Facebook, as well as a host of other social media and Web 2.0 tools, can be employed to encourage students' participation and thus broaden and deepen all students' experiences and perspectives. ■

Dr. Cory Callahan is an AAE member and teaches students at Auburn High School (faculty) and Auburn University (instructor), both in Alabama. Cory has received an Indiana University-sponsored Jacobs Educator Award for outstanding teachers who use technology to support innovative inquiry-based teaching and learning in their classrooms.

New AAE Video

AAE was thrilled to launch a new video featuring many of our fantastic members from across the country this fall. We invite you to share this video so that educators from coast to coast can know that there is an organization that supports the next generation of educators.

The new video explores the many reasons why educators are called to the teaching profession, and draws particular attention to the growth and positivity of the nonunion movement. The AAE members featured in this video not only express their love of teaching children but also their dedication to elevating the standard of teaching to a more professional level.

Teachers have any number of reasons for being a teacher. At AAE, we work hard every day to promote educators as academic professionals. We know why you teach. Visit aaeteachers.org to view the video. ■



DEDICATION



INSPIRATION

Movie Review:

Won't Back Down Celebrates Parent Activism

Do you really think you could change things? That's a big question being asked by *Won't Back Down*, a movie released in September, with a rare Hollywood mix of blistering policy debate and big-screen drama.

The policy debate centers on Parent Trigger laws, which currently enable parents from California to Mississippi to require changes at low-performing schools such as restructuring or conversion to a charter school. Seven states currently have Parent Trigger laws, and fifteen more are considering them, according to community organizer Parent Revolution.

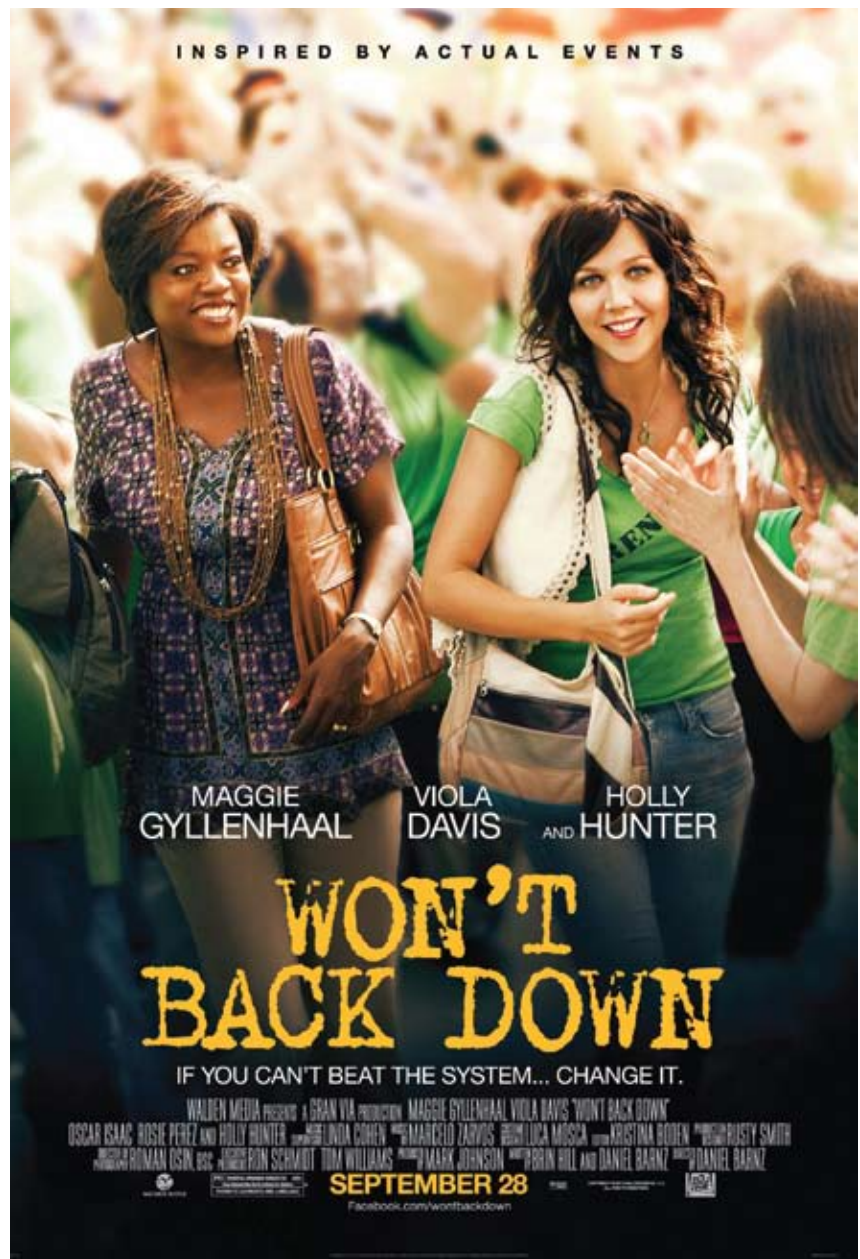
Won't Back Down seeks to cut through the political controversy surrounding Parent Trigger laws and display a very human story. And its big stars and big heart don't hurt.

Movie Star Power

The Walden Media movie, starring Maggie Gyllenhaal and Viola Davis, tells the inspiring story of two fed up moms, one a teacher, banding together to transform their children's failing urban school. Shot and set in Pittsburgh (although Pennsylvania doesn't have a Parent Trigger law), the movie is fiction but claims to be "inspired by true events."

Won't Back Down has already faced the ire of angry union supporters and anti-trigger advocates on social media outlets.

However this movie is different because it sets aside the contro-



versy and focuses on what matters: parents and teachers improving life for their kids.

The movie opens, fittingly, in a noisy classroom at the fictional John Adams Elementary. Little Malia struggles through sounding out the word “order,” while an exasperated teacher rolls her eyes. Malia gives up, tears in her eyes, saying simply, “I can’t.”

“Desperation turns to joyful aspiration as these parents and teachers realize change is possible.”

Parent Power

Enter Malia’s mother, the gritty blue-collar mom Gyllenhaal plays with jarring tenacity. Desperate for options, unable to afford private school and a loser at the charter school lottery, she turns to a tired, equally frustrated teacher (Davis) after hearing about “a law that lets parents turn schools around.” Together they rouse their community by knocking on doors, printing flyers, and even throwing a rally at a car lot, all to fix an elementary school that everyone else seems to think may not be worth fixing.

The duo must convince teachers, generate ideas to improve learning, and combat a system that embraces futility. In one memorable montage, the protagonists

meet with school board officials, their mouths agape at the technicalities required just to schedule a hearing.

It’s a Hollywood movie, and a straight-up good-triumphs-over-evil tale, so there must be a bad guy, and it’s the bureaucracy. The viewers are told, via a frustrated teacher, “The only thing the district does right is cover up what it does wrong.” And, of course, the union functions as the bad guy for its exclusive focus on teacher comfort instead of kids. But teachers themselves are never vilified, only portrayed as frustrated victims like their students, thwarted by a rotten system. An increasingly disillusioned union worker, played smartly by Holly Hunter, tries to help one kid by sacrificing a school of them, and is just as frustrated as any mom or teacher in the film as a result.

However one lucid theme keeps *Won’t Back Down* from being political messaging: hope. It’s like a soaring, joyful message from the other side of America’s education challenges, an admonition to never give up. Desperation turns to joyful aspiration as these parents and teachers realize change is possible. At one point, while Gyllenhaal and Davis are convincing Adams Elementary teachers to join their cause, one teacher asks honestly, “Do you really think you could change things?” Davis dithers, but Gyllenhaal’s hero-mom looks at the teacher and the viewer steely eyed, with clear, forceful conviction and says, “100 percent, yes.”

We have to hope she’s right, and that she’s not the only mom who won’t back down in tackling failing schools. ■

Joel Paveleski writes from New York City. His review originally appeared in *The Heartlander*.



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