

Education *Matters*

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CRAFTSMEN OF CHARACTER

Fostering
an Ethic
of Excellence

By Ron Berger

For twenty-five years I've led a double life. I'm a full-time classroom teacher in a public school. To make ends meet for my family, I've worked during the summers, and sometimes weekends, as a carpenter. In carpentry there is no higher compliment builders give each other than this: That person is a craftsman. This one word says it all. It connotes someone who has integrity, knowledge, dedication, and pride in work—someone who thinks carefully and does things well.

I want a classroom full of craftsmen—students whose work is strong, accurate, and beautiful; students who are proud of what they do and respect themselves and others.

In my classroom I have students who come from homes full of books and students whose families own almost no books at all. I have students for whom reading, writing, and math come easily, and students whose brains can't follow a line of text without reversing words and

letters. I have students whose lives are generally easy, and students with physical disabilities and health or family problems that make life a struggle. I want them all to be craftsmen. Some may take a little longer; some may need to use extra strategies and resources. In the end, they need to be proud of their work, and their work needs to be worthy of pride.

I'm concerned when I pick up a newspaper these days and find an article about the "crisis" in education and how a new quick fix will remedy things. I think as a nation we've gotten off track regarding education. Our concern seems to be centered on testing and on ranking students, schools, and districts. I believe our concern should be centered on what we can do in our schools and communities to bring out the best in kids.

Needing a Culture of Excellence

Some schools are very good; some are not. Those that are good have an ethic, a

culture, that supports and demands quality work. Those schools that are not effective need a lot more than new tests and new mandates. They need to build a new culture.

In my work with schools across the country, I encounter places where students are remarkably good at something. These schools dominate state competitions in orchestra, chess, wrestling, visual arts, debate, and essay contests, and have done so for years.

What's going on here? I don't think this is genetics or luck. Private schools and universities can recruit talent, but these are public schools. Every year they take whatever kids they happen to get and make them stars. This phenomenon isn't limited to special areas. My colleagues at the Central Park East High School in Harlem and the Fenway High School in Boston work with urban students, almost all of whom are low-income and non-white, for whom the predicted graduation statistics are dismal. These schools graduate 95

percent of their seniors and send about 90 percent to college.

These schools don't have any special magic. The key to excellence is this: It is born from a culture. When children enter a family culture, a community culture, or a school culture that demands and supports excellence, they work to fit into that culture. It doesn't matter what their background is. Once those children enter a culture with a powerful ethic—an ethic of excellence—that ethic becomes their norm. It's what they know.

Unfortunately, most students, I believe, are caught on school treadmills that focus on quantity of work rather than quality of work. Students crank out endless final products every day and night. Teachers correct volumes of such low-quality work; it's returned to the students and often tossed into the wastebasket. Little in it is memorable or significant, and little in it engenders personal or community pride. I feel that schools need

to get off this treadmill and shift their focus from quantity to quality.

Work of excellence is transformational. Once a student sees that he or she is capable of quality, of excellence, that student is never quite the same. There is a new self-image, a new notion of possibility. There is an appetite for excellence. After students have had a taste of excellence, they're never quite satisfied with less.

Culture Matters

The achievement of students is governed to a large degree by their family culture, neighborhood culture, and school culture. Students may have different potentials, but in general their attitudes and achievements are

shaped by the culture around them. Students adjust their attitudes and efforts in order to fit into the culture. If the peer culture ridicules academic effort and achievement—it isn't cool to care openly

about school—this is a powerful force. If the peer culture celebrates investment in school, this is just as powerful. Schools need to consciously shape their cultures to be places where it's safe to care, cool to care.

When children first come to school, they do care. An enthusiastic attitude toward learning seems universal in kindergartens. By secondary school, however, things are very different. I am struck in particular by conversations with middle school and high school students from poor urban or rural neighborhoods who attend large schools. When I ask about the social norm for showing interest in learning, I am often met by friendly laughter. Students say you would be out of your mind to raise your hand in class or otherwise show interest in school. This attitude appears to be a primary obstacle to achievement in these schools.

I was raised with the message that peer pressure was something negative. Peer pressure meant kids trying to talk you into smoking cigarettes or taking drugs. I realized after ten years of teaching that positive peer pressure was often the primary reason my classroom was a safe, supportive environment for student learning. Peer pressure wasn't something to be afraid of,

“When students enter a culture that demands excellence, they work to fit into that culture.”

A Report to the Nation: Integrating Excellence and Ethics

Schools need a paradigm shift in character education—from focusing only on moral character to focusing on both performance character (striving for excellence) and moral character (striving for ethical behavior), so concludes a new report.

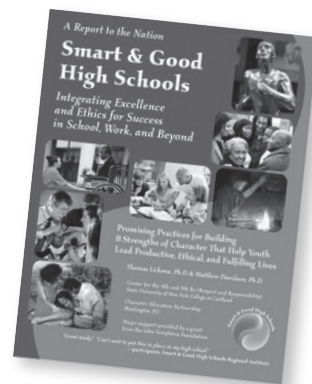
Smart and Good High Schools was released by the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs (Respect and Responsibility) and the Washington, D.C.-based Character Education Partnership, with major grant support from the John Templeton Foundation. It describes nearly 100 school and classroom practices that are useful to teachers, school leaders, and schools of education preparing the next generation of teachers and administrators.

The study included site visits to twenty-four award-winning high schools in every part of the country, a comprehensive research review, and the input of a National Experts Panel and a National Student Leaders Panel. Although the findings and recommendations come out of this high school research, middle and elementary school educators have said

they also find the report's conceptual framework and many of its practices relevant to their work.

The report defines performance character and moral character in terms of specific strengths of character (lifelong learner and critical thinker; diligent and capable moral agent; self-disciplined person; contributing community member; and spiritual person engaged in crafting a life of noble purpose) that will help young people lead flourishing lives.

The complete report is also downloadable free from www.cortland.edu/character/highschool (Bound copies are available from the Character Development Group, www.charactereducation.com).



to be avoided, but rather something to be cultivated in a positive direction.

An Ethic of Excellence

Five practices (see sidebar) are essential for creating and sustaining a classroom culture of excellence: 1) assign work that matters; 2) study examples of excellence; 3) build a culture of critique; 4) require multiple revisions; and 5) provide opportunities for public presentation.

How do I really know what I have done for students? How do I know what my school has done? I think of my life in my small town. The policeman is a former student. I trust him to protect my life. The nurse at my medical clinic is my former student. I trust her with my health. The lifeguard at the town lake is my former student. She watches my grandsons as they swim. There may not be numbers to measure these things, but there is a reason I feel so thankful trusting my life to these people. They take pride in doing their best. They have an ethic of excellence. ■



Adapted from Ron Berger's An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students (Heinemann, 2003). Ron Berger was a public school teacher for twenty-eight years and is now a

school consultant/designer for Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound. He can be reached at rberger@massed.net. Reprinted by permission from Center for the Fourth and Fifth Rs, www.cortland.edu/character.

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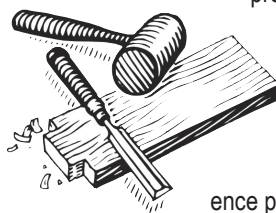
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Ron Berger's Five Essential Practices

Practices essential for creating a culture of excellence.

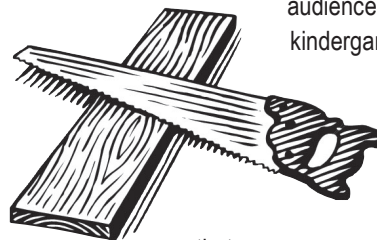
1 Assign work that matters. Students need assignments that challenge and inspire them. At the Raphael Hernandez School in Boston, for example, middle-schoolers took on a study of vacant lots in their Roxbury neighborhood. Students researched the history of the sites and interviewed neighborhood members regarding what uses they would prefer for the lots. They presented their proposals to the mayor of Boston and his staff, and one of the sites was later converted into community gardens.

2 Study examples of excellence. Before they begin work on a project, the teacher and students examine models of excellence—high-quality work done by previous students



as well as work done by professionals. What makes a particular science project, piece of writing, or architectural blueprint so good? What was the process of achieving such high quality? What mistakes and revisions most likely took place in the process?

3 Build a culture of critique. Formal critique sessions build a culture of critique that is essential for improving students' work. The rules for group critique: "Be kind; be specific; be helpful." Students presenting a piece of work first explain their ideas or goals and state what help they are seeking. Classmates begin with positive comments and phrase suggestions as questions: "Have you considered...?" The teacher uses the critique session as the



optimal opportunity for teaching necessary concepts and skills. Through this process, students have regular experiences of being able to improve the quality of a piece of work because of feedback from others.

4 Require multiple revisions. In most schools, students turn in first drafts—work that does not represent their best effort and it is typically discarded after it has been graded and returned. In life, when the quality of one's work really matters, one almost never submits a first draft. An ethic of excellence requires revision.



5 Provide opportunities for public presentation. Every final draft students complete is done for an outside audience—whether a class of kindergartners, the principal, or the wider community. The teacher's role is not as the sole judge of their work but rather similar to that of a sports coach or play director—helping them get their work ready for the public eye. ■

Cars Hit the Small Screen

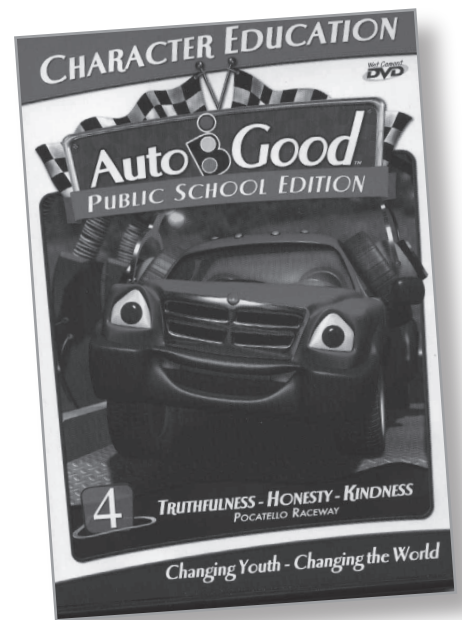
New Character Education Video Curriculum for Elementary Schools

Auto-B-Good is an award-winning twelve-volume set that presents thirty-six different character traits. Each of the twelve volumes contains three 8 to 10 minute episodes. The thirty-six universal traits give schools a unique trait for each week of a typical school year and are compatible with virtually every character curriculum available. It also includes a teacher's guide for every volume.

Auto-B-Good has already received an Emmy Award for graphics and animation, a Telly Award for excellence in education resources, and the Dove Family Seal of Approval.

Tom Lickona, Director for the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs (Respect and Responsibility), says, "*Auto-B-Good* presents engaging, streetwise characters that today's elementary kids can identify with—to learn not only why it's important to have good character but also how to be honest, dependable, and responsible citizens of the world. The curriculum guide is a well-designed tool for the classroom teacher."

For more information, contact Wet Cement Productions by calling (719) 488-0994 or by visiting www.wetcementproductions.com.

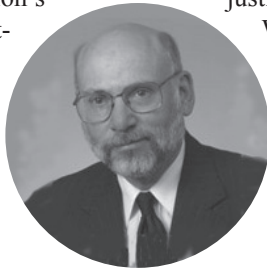


Justice Done

NCATE Drops "Social Justice" as Accreditation Standard

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has decided to drop the reference to "social justice" in its professional dispositions standard. The announcement was made by Dr. Arthur Wise, the president of NCATE, at a meeting of the Department of Education's National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity, which was reviewing NCATE's petition for continuing recognition. The National Association of Scholars (NAS), one of the leading organizations expressing concerns about NCATE's standards, was pleased.

"The NAS has had a long-standing concern with the mischief inherent in the use of as ideologically fraught a term as 'social justice' in the assessment of students in teacher-training programs," said Steve Balch, NAS's president. "The concept is so variable in meaning as necessarily to subject



Dr. Stephen Balch, president of the National Association of Scholars.

students to the ideological caprices of instructors and programs. We are therefore most pleased that NCATE has responded to the efforts of the NAS, and other groups that brought this issue to the attention of the Department of Education, by eliminating its 'social justice' dispositions standard.

We trust that NCATE will vigorously communicate this change to its member programs."

"Many teacher-training programs at public institutions continue to use 'social justice' in their student-evaluation protocols. These practices raise the same intellectual freedom and First Amendment issues as did NCATE's standard. The elimination of these programmatic political tests should be the next step," Dr. Balch concluded.

Source—*National Association of Scholars*, www.nas.org

Free Speech Watch

\$220,000 to Fire a Tenured Teacher

As a follow-up to his series on "The Hidden Cost of Tenure" for Small Newspaper Group, Scott Reeder addressed some criticism his reports received from Illinois teacher unions.

"In the original series, which was published in December," Reeder wrote, "the newspapers said school districts reasonably could expect to spend at least \$100,000 to try to fire a tenured teacher."

Reeder's estimate was immediately called into question by one of the state's two major teacher unions, the Illinois Federation of Teachers, which contends such cases usually cost school districts less than \$50,000.

Small Newspaper Group filed Freedom of Information Act requests for every attorney bill paid by a school district in a tenured teacher dismissal case during the last five years. Those bills indicate school districts spent an average of \$219,504.21 in legal fees for dismissal cases and related litigation.

"As staggering as that number is," wrote Reeder, "it actually understates the ultimate cost of these lawsuits because 44 percent of these cases are still on appeal and the lawyer bills continue to grow."

Source—*EIA Communiqué*

"The potential of a child is the most intriguing and stimulating thing in all creation."

— Ray L. Wilbur (1875-1949), President of Stanford University

Highly Qualified Shame

States shirk their responsibility to provide accurate data

By Phyllis McClure

NCLB requires all states, at the end of the current school year, to prove that their teachers in charge of academic classes are “highly qualified.” In an era of accountability, it’s a reasonable request. After all, we ask students to be proficient in their subjects. Shouldn’t we ask the same of their teachers?

States have had four years to prepare for this deadline. Are they ready? They say yes. During the 2003-2004 school year, the latest for which data are available, thirty-one of forty-seven states reporting to the Department of Education claimed that at least 90 percent of their elementary and secondary classes were taught by highly qualified teachers. As it turns out, however, the numbers most states reported were bogus.

Stunning Problems

While making onsite visits to see how they were faring, federal officials uncovered stunning problems in forty written compliance reports. Teachers were classified as highly qualified based on criteria that did not match federal requirements. Some long-time teachers, for example, were treated as highly qualified simply because of their seniority. Whole categories of instructors, notably special education teachers, were omitted. And every state considered middle and high school history teachers highly qualified if they were licensed in the field of social studies rather than in history itself, as the law demands.

The three states reporting the highest percentage of highly qualified teachers were, not surprisingly, among the worst offenders. For example, Washington state claimed that 99 percent of all its teachers were highly qualified. However, when Education Department monitors showed up in May 2005, they quickly saw why that figure was so high. The state incorrectly recognized as highly qualified any teacher with an elementary or special education degree.

Connecticut was reviewed in January 2006. The Constitution State began requir-

ing subject-matter tests of all elementary teachers in 1988, so theoretically, every teacher hired in elementary education on or after that date who also held full state certification met the federal standard. But the state also counted, incorrectly, all elementary teachers hired prior to 1988 as highly qualified. Furthermore, federal officials found that Connecticut had not yet collected teacher data from all of its 195 districts and that it did not have a statewide database that included information about its highly qualified teachers. Instead, it had a licensure and certification database from which state officials concluded that 99 percent of core academic classes were being taught by highly qualified teachers. But, with few exceptions, the state included all fully certified teachers in that percentage, whether they had demonstrated subject matter competence.

During the Minnesota review in November 2005, federal officials found that the Land of 10,000 Lakes considered highly qualified all elementary teachers licensed prior to 2001, even if they had not demonstrated subject matter competency. In addition, Minnesota did not require teachers hired after the first day of the 2002-2003 school year to take a rigorous subject-matter test. The state’s report that 99 percent of its teachers were highly qualified was unquestionably wrong.

Consciously Misleading

It is entirely possible that Washington, Connecticut, Minnesota, and the other states that reported bogus numbers will ultimately prove to the Education Department that their teachers meet the federal requirements for highly certified. However, we can’t count on their word alone. They’ve been consciously providing misleading data to the public for years.

Because most states have not met the highly qualified teachers mandate, Secretary Margaret Spellings announced last October that they might be given an extra year if they started to show good faith in meeting federal requirements. In a March 21, 2006, letter, the Education Depart-



ment announced it would ask most states to submit a revised plan for getting all of their teachers highly qualified. States must also complete a review of their highly qualified designations by the end of the present school year, and put special emphasis on closing the “teacher quality gap” between rich and poor schools.

Waiting Too Long

The flexibility is understandable on the federal government’s end. Clearly it waited too long before investigating lofty state claims; now it has no choice but to be patient. Also, securing high-quality teachers—especially in high-poverty high-minority schools—is difficult. But it’s essential if we’re to improve student academic achievement.

States ought to be ashamed for reporting such inflated statistics. Because of their dishonesty, educators now have but one year to achieve the highly qualified designation, a fact that will surely mean good teachers who, with appropriate warning, could have met the requirements, will fall by the wayside. Of course, No Child Left Behind itself will take the blame. But this time there’s no doubt that it’s the states who have shirked their responsibilities—to not only students but also teachers. ■

Phyllis McClure, an independent researcher, tracks implementation of No Child Left Behind for the Citizens’ Commission on Civil Rights.

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The Don Quixote of Education

Looking backward on his horse, Kozol rides again.

By Chester E. Finn, Jr.

Once upon a time, Jonathan Kozol played a formative and constructive role in my career. *Death at an Early Age*, his evocative tale of the tribulations of inner-city school children and the trials of a novice Boston teacher, appeared in 1967—two years after the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, three years into the War on Poverty, and just as I was trying to figure out what to do with my life. It strengthened my resolve to plunge into the icy, swirling waters of education reform.

Since then, I've learned a lot about what makes schools (and kids) tick and what sorts of reforms have a chance of transforming American K-12 education into an enterprise that, in fact, leaves no child behind.

Alas, Kozol has learned nothing. He's been writing the exact same stuff for four decades, blaming the woes of urban education (and urban kids) on racism, inadequate spending, and, of late, testing. (See Marcus Winters' article in the Spring 2006 issue of *Education Next*.)

His Crusade

Kozol's latest crusade is to strike a blow at standards-based reform in general and NCLB in particular. On June 16, he circulated an update written for those "Education Activists who have asked me: where do we go next?"

Kozol's answer: he's formed a new group called "Education Action" in order "to fight racism and inequality and the murderous impact of the NCLB legislation...with the goal of mobilizing educators to resist the testing mania and directly challenge Congress, possibly by a march on Washington, at the time when NCLB comes up for reauthorization in 2007."

He notified his mailing list that Education Action is now headquartered in a house that "we've purchased for this purpose" (but which also seems to be Kozol's



The phrase "time warp" doesn't quite do justice to his view of education—and of politics.

home address) in a lovely, leafy neighborhood of Cambridge, Massachusetts, just off high-rent Brattle Street and a few short blocks from Harvard Square—the perfect place from which to crusade for equality.

"We are already in contact," he wrote, "with our close friends at Rethinking Schools, with dozens of local action groups like Teachers for Social Justice in San Francisco, with dynamic African-American religious groups that share our goals, with activist white denominations [whatever that may mean], and with some of the NEA and AFT affiliates, in particular the activist caucuses within both unions such as those in Oakland, Miami, and Los Angeles. But we want to extend these contacts rapidly in order to create what one of our friends who is the leader of a major union local calls 'a massive wave of noncompliance.'"

A massive wave of noncompliance, huh? Just what disadvantaged American school kids need. That will surely close the learning gap and guarantee them basic skills and core knowledge. But there's more. Kozol and his allies are also "determined that we turn the growing, but too often muted and frustrated discontent with NCLB and the racist policies and privatizing forces that are threatening the very soul of public education into a series of national actions that are explicitly political in the same tradition as the civil rights upheavals of the early 1960s. We

want to pull in youth affiliates as well and are working with high school kids and countless college groups that are burning with a sense of shame and indignation at the stupid and destructive education policies of state and federal autocrats."

The phrase "time warp" doesn't quite do justice to this view of education—and of politics. It may be more like profound cynicism blended with self-aggrandizement. Kozol has grown wealthy by selling books to educators and speaking at their conferences. Now he's joining—even seeking to lead—the anti-NCLB backlash among educators, all the while waving his familiar flag of racism and injustice, yet refusing to offer any plausible alternatives for fixing our failing urban schools.

If he has his way, those inner city kids will stay ignorant forever—and he can keep penning outraged (but bestselling) books about their mistreatment at society's hands. Where's the real injustice in this picture? ■



Chester E. Finn, Jr. is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington, D.C., and a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education.

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Could the End of the Reading Wars be in Sight?

By Kate Walsh

Following the release of our study *What Education Schools Aren't Teaching About Reading—and What Elementary Teachers Aren't Learning*—in which we reported the dismal finding that 15 percent of a representative sampling of ed schools weren't teaching the science of reading—we do have one piece of encouraging news. The customary pushback that usually follows on the heels of any rallying cry for the science hasn't happened. There's usually no shortage of educators willing to insist that the science of reading isn't science but a "point of view," but not this time. Could the end of the reading wars possibly be in sight?

Refreshing Response

The new president of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), Sharon Robinson, responded to our report with refreshing candor, though a bit too much patience: "The professional community does indeed see the need for change." She went on to say that the new research "is in fact starting to influence the field." Robinson's tempered remarks represent quite a sea change for an organization that once argued that the science was either invalid or a right-wing plot to put scripts in every classroom.

National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)—whose schools, we learned, are no more likely to teach the science than nonaccredited schools—came out blasting, but it wasn't entirely clear at whom the blast was being directed. We'd like to think it wasn't us, but that may be wishful thinking. In an aggressively distributed press release,



NCATE told the world that it plans to begin to hold its schools accountable for what they teach about reading sometime next year. Given that the research consensus is close to twenty years old, might we suggest the fast track?

Foot Dragging

And in an interesting twist on the reading wars, we learned that NCATE is sitting on an important new study that examines the degree to which state licensing tests actually test any reading knowledge that is based on science. NCATE's reluctance seems to be a pattern in Washington these days, but in this instance it's anyone's guess why NCATE is blocking the release. Ironically, the paper was paid for by U.S. Department of Education Reading First funds so the paper is unlikely to be hidden much longer.

For the study, the nation's largest test-

ing company, ETS, obligingly gave access to a review team from AACTE to look at five of its tests that purportedly test reading knowledge (which begs the question, how many reading tests does this nation need?). As it turns out only one of the five, the Praxis 0201, contains much science, and that test is only used by Tennessee... and only sort of. Tennessee has never set a passing score for the test so it's not clear how anyone could fail.

Testing

The NCATE study did find three other tests that test what they say they test. All were tailor-made for three states with a strong track record for their dedication to reading science: Massachusetts, California, and Virginia. And given the reluctance of so many ed schools to teach the science of reading, these tests play a critical role. Until ed schools accept the science in earnest, the only practical way to ensure that teachers get the training they need to be effective with the most children will be for states to require stand-alone reading tests. Anything less—including any test in which only a portion is dedicated to the reading science—will continue to fall short. ■



*Kate Walsh is president of the National Council on Teacher Quality (www.nctq.org). This article is adapted from the *Teacher Quality Bulletin*.*