

Education Matters

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LEADING STUDENTS TO NEW HEIGHTS

Dr. Bill Proser gets more from students than even they thought possible

By Cindy Omlin

In 1999, Dr. Bill Proser founded the Coeur d'Alene Charter Academy (the Academy), the first college preparatory charter high school in the Pacific Northwest. This month, it was recognized by the Center for Education Reform (CER) as one of its National Charter Schools of the Year among hundreds of nominees.

"Our idea," Proser explains, "was to take the same dedication and energy that we have in athletics and apply it to the classroom. We wanted to create an equal playing field where students compete for excellence."

Proser has served as the Academy's founder, principal, academic dean, and English department chair as well as teacher. Under his direction, the Academy adopted a rigorous academic curriculum along with a strong work ethic and accountability. The school resurrected the "C" grade to represent the statistical average (instead of, as it is commonly used

today, the lowest grade given).

Many students enter the school unprepared for the rigorous workload. A minimum of three hours of homework each night is average. However, students rise to the challenge, according to Dr. Proser. "It is gratifying," he says, "to observe the many average and below-average students who accept the academic challenge and not only improve but also flourish."

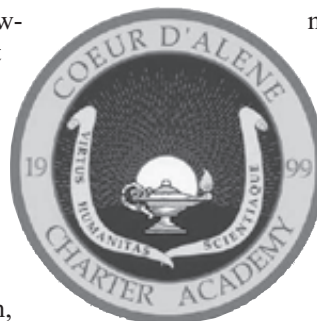
Proser is intent on closing the achievement gap for all his students. By implementing an original college preparatory curriculum, which includes Latin in seventh grade, interdisciplinary history and English classes, and accelerated reading of 75-100 of the "best books ever written," Academy students consistently outperform district, state, and national norms

after entering the school scoring at about the average (mean) national percentile level.

Dr. Charles J. Clock, a management and educational consultant, helped the Academy develop an efficient and effective use of testing and measurement data that helps track student achievement and keeps the instructional program focused on student needs. His research shows that the longer students remain in the Academy, the better they perform. The school can show significant longitudinal skill gains

after only one year. Academy college admission test scores consistently average in the upper 25th percentile ranges.

The major requirements for academic assessment are to monitor student prog-





ress over time (using longitudinal data) and to test this progress with performance-based instruments. The primary tests are the CTB/McGraw-Hill TerraNova Performance Assessment tests in Communication Arts and Math. Dr. Clock has documented that entry-level students tend to score lower than students who had been attending the Academy at each grade. To the Academy's credit, those students end up scoring higher than their cohorts score in the schools from which they came.

Proser's classroom has been described by Cynthia Taggart, a parent and education reporter for the *Spokesman Review*, as a "think tank." According to Taggart, Proser, a proponent of knowledge-based learning, "invites discussion, opinions, scrutiny, and examination. He does not duck controversy, but uses it to bore deeper into a subject. He wants to hear what his students think because he might learn from them." Dr. Proser requires his students to read and write prolifically and think fearlessly because their goal is the same. "We're all searching for the truth."

College students consistently report that their college English and literature classes are "easy" after experiencing Dr. Proser in high school. Richard Rock, a former student of Proser's, entered the Stanford Graduate School of Business as its youngest student. He was appointed senior director of new business development at eBay. Featured in *Coeur d'Alene Magazine's* Winter 2000 issue, Rock credited Bill Proser with helping him develop critical thinking skills. "Hard work, critical thinking, problem solving, communication, innovation, and excellence are the timeless elements needed for business success," according to Rock. Dr. Proser "always challenged people to question everything and the root thinking behind it."

Dr. Proser stands by his foundational principle, "A school is only as good as its teachers." There are no union contracts hampering Proser's mission to staff only exemplary teachers. They enjoy wide latitude and liberty to decide how their classes are taught, but they must

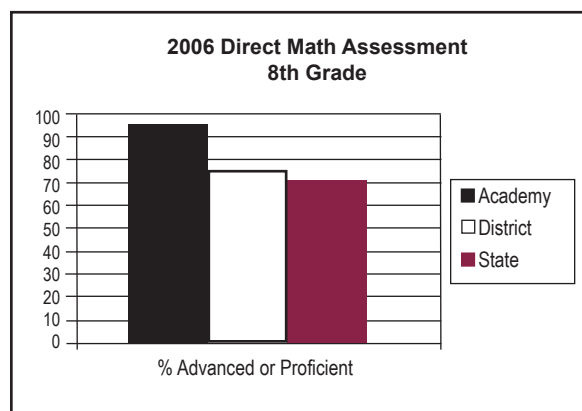
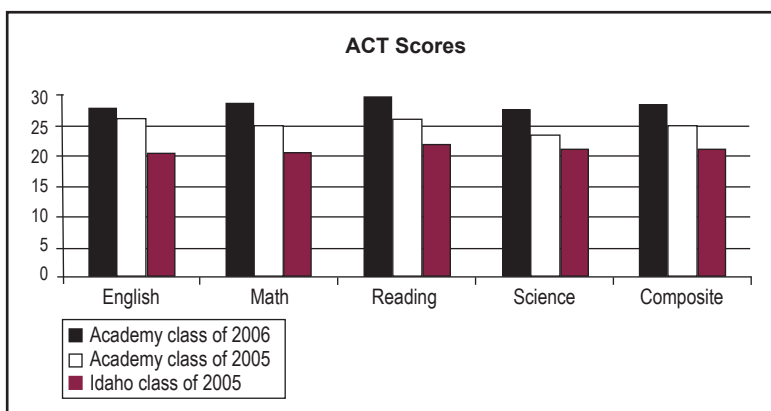
prove their effectiveness and strive for constant improvement or they are let go. Academy teachers are well rewarded for their efforts, enjoying salaries and professional autonomy that exceed that of their colleagues in traditional public schools. Most have joined Northwest Professional Educators for professional benefits such as liability insurance and legal services.

Through ardent, stimulating teaching and the persistent determination to establish and maintain a demanding college prep charter school, Dr. Proser has closed the achievement gap for Academy students.

After eight solid years, he has proven that his vision and plan for helping students achieve the highest possible standards works. "We seem to be the best kept secret in the state," Proser notes. "To me, our success is explosive." ■

Cindy Omlin is the Executive Director of Northwest Professional Educators. Its website is www.nwpe.org.

Coeur d'Alene Charter Academy Performance



Outtakes

No Hollywood Ending for Some Teachers

By Richard Berman

Everyone loves a great teacher. The continued success of movies like “Freedom Writers” or other classics in the genre indicates that we love big-screen reassurance that a great teacher can set hearts aflame with desire for learning, no matter the circumstances. But the camera doesn’t show everything.

Stand and Deliver

Jaime Escalante, the legendary teacher immortalized in *Stand and Deliver*, left his own East L.A. math program after it became a victim of its own success, one fact the movie did not mention. His classes were so popular that they grew beyond the size considered acceptable by the teachers union. Explaining his departure, Escalante said: “I work for the students, not for the teachers. ... The teachers union was not in my favor.”

Union rules also prevented Escalante protégé Angelo Villavicencio from counting his years under the legend towards seniority-based pay when he went to teach in Chino.

Freedom Writers

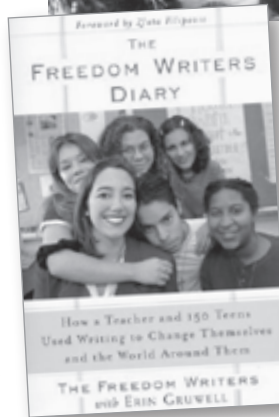
The subject of the new Hillary Swank film, *Freedom Writers*, also ran afoul of her teachers union. English teacher Erin Gruwell took 150 disadvantaged Long Beach kids, instilled in them a love of writing, and brought every last one of them to graduation. This despite her union’s seniority rules. The wildly successful young teacher was held back from moving up with her students (since union seniority, not success, determined who taught what subjects) until she lobbied the school board for an exemption.

Left on the Cutting Room Floor

The list of exceptional teachers hamstrung by their unions isn’t limited to the ones featured by Hollywood. Dr. Cathy Nelson, trumpeted by the union Education Minnesota as the state’s Teacher of the Year, was laid off months before receiving the award. Her school was shedding students, and its union contract required that the most junior teachers be fired first.

Another example: On May 28, 1998, Sarah Gustafson was named to the Florida Educator Hall of Fame. On May 29, 1998, Sarah Gustafson was fired for her lack of seniority.

These examples make for dark comedy, but the state of American education is anything but funny. Too many great teachers are



held back by union policies – the same “rights” won by union organizers are the very things that can deny more children access to great teachers.

Some union leaders counter criticism by saying that their contracts protect good teachers from arbitrary administrators. But if that’s true, why not demand greater professionalism from principals instead of dropping standards for teachers?

What can a union offer a talented, professional-minded young woman or man? They know that trading away performance-based pay for ironclad job security is no bargain at all since being a good teacher doesn’t seem to ensure job security.

There may be a political solution to union dominance in schools, but it turns out that politics is their strong suit. As a 2006 study discovered, unionized teachers in Southern California turn out for school board elections at a rate five times higher than registered voters. It seems that Erin Gruwell wasn’t just an exceptional mentor to her Freedom Writers. She was also lucky to have a board president willing to rock the boat.

As the movies tell us, there are only so many Erin Gruwells and Jaime Escalantes, only so many Cathy Nelsons and Sarah Gustafsons. We can’t hope to run American education on the blood of martyrs. If unions would loosen their death grip on public schools, we won’t have to. ■



Richard Berman is Executive Director of The Center for Union Facts, a business-backed organization critical of some union leadership (www.unionfacts.com).

Everybody Counts

New Curriculum Teaches the Understanding of Disabilities to Grades K-8

A new curriculum to teach children in grades K-8 the understanding of disabilities has been developed by Everybody Counts. This revised and updated program teaches children about various disabilities and how children with these challenges cope with them. The goal is better understanding, so that children can know the person behind the disability, thus creating a climate in which everyone can feel at ease with one another's differences.

The program consists of nine different sections to be presented to grades K-8. One disability or condition is presented to age comprehension levels each year. Sessions include presentations and simulations that provide children with an opportunity to experience what it would be like to cope with a disability. Each year the program is repeated so that children learn about a new disability each year. Doing so fosters an attitude of tolerance and understanding for all people.

Sessions are taught by parent volunteers from each school. Volunteers, who need nothing more than a desire to help, are provided copies of lesson plans from the Curriculum Guide. Supplies for the simulations, which are reusable year after year, can be purchased locally. Support materials such as stickers, pencils, and mugs, are available from Everybody Counts.

Follow-up speakers who are coping with the disability discussed or parents of children with the disabilities are invited to the classroom to enhance understanding.

Among the disabilities covered are blindness, hearing impairment, mild cognitive delay, motor disabilities, learning disabilities, severe cognitive delay, chronic conditions, and serious illness.

Nancy Kayes started the Everybody Counts Program out of both need and love. She and her husband Joe have



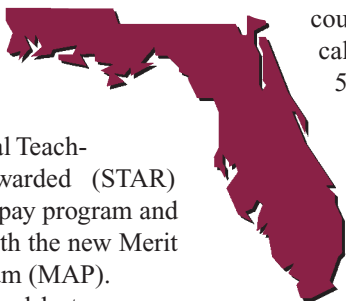
nineteen children—three from birth and sixteen through adoptions. Eleven of the children are disabled or differently abled in some way. Her experience as a pediatric and school nurse demonstrated that children are kind and caring, and simply want to better understand people who are different than them. Everybody Counts was founded with the premise that these differences do not have to be barriers. For additional information contact them via e-mail at info@everybodycounts.net. ■

Florida Changes Course with Teacher Compensation

Florida recently repealed its beleaguered Special Teachers Are Rewarded (STAR) performance-pay program and replaced it with the new Merit Award Program (MAP).

STAR, passed last year under Governor Jeb Bush, was itself an attempt to end controversy over the state's earlier attempts at performance pay. Almost immediately, STAR encountered sharp criticism from unions and districts alike, including a legal challenge by the Florida Education Association (FEA).

MAP actually increases how much objective student achievement measures will



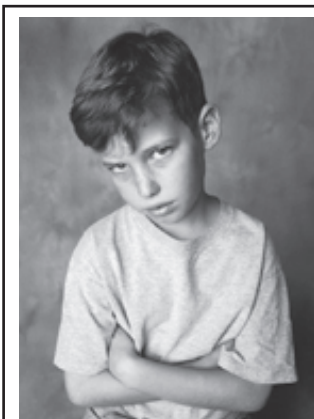
count in the bonus calculation, from 50 percent under STAR to 60 percent under MAP.

That begs the question of what was really bothering the union all along when they complained that STAR focused too much on testing. The difference is that MAP is less focused on learning gains, and increases the likelihood that a teacher in a chronically high-performing school will get awards. So once again, the focus is shifted away from solving problems like the achievement gap and back toward making sure that every-

one gets his fair share.

There are some improvements over the old plan, however. STAR was targeted at giving at least the top 25 percent of teachers in each district a bonus equal to 5 percent of their base salaries. The new system gives districts more flexibility in deciding the size of the bonus, ranging from 5 to 10 percent of the average teacher salary in the district. This provision helps districts eliminate STAR's de facto penalty on new teachers who are lower on the salary schedule, since the new calculation will mean they can be awarded the same size of bonus as a more veteran teacher.

Will MAP outlive its predecessors? Only time will tell.



“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”

Fredrick Douglas (1817-1895)
American Writer, Civil Rights Activist

Nine States Join Forces to Launch New Algebra II Test

A consortium of nine states has joined forces to launch a new, common student assessment in Algebra II. This marks the largest effort a group of states has ever undertaken to develop a common assessment based on common standards. The test represents a promising new model for multistate reform efforts at a time when the overall lackluster achievement of high school students has fueled debates about the creation of national standards and extending No Child Left Behind Act to high schools.

The consortium of states includes Arkansas, Kentucky, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island. The project is an initiative of the American Diploma Project (ADP) Network, a group of twenty-nine states committed to preparing all students for college and work. ADP Network states educate nearly 60 percent of all U.S. public school students.

The test will first be administered in May 2008, when it is projected that more than

200,000 students will participate in the assessment. The test will initially be used by the nine states that are part of the consortium, but other states, including those that are not members of the ADP Network, will be allowed to administer the test and join the partnership. The test will be used differently across states as each decides how best to phase in the new assessment.

Algebra II is one of several “gatekeeper” courses in high school that research indicates can be a significant predictor

of college-readiness and success. Two landmark studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Education have indicated that the highest level of math taken in high school is the most powerful predictor of whether a student will ultimately earn a bachelor’s degree, and that students completing Algebra II in high school more than doubled their chances of earning a four-year college degree. ■

For more information, please visit www.achieve.org.

Closing the Gap

Faith and Family Eliminate Achievement Gap

A recent analysis of nationwide data by a Southern California professor shows that the achievement gap is more easily bridged than most academics and educators believe.

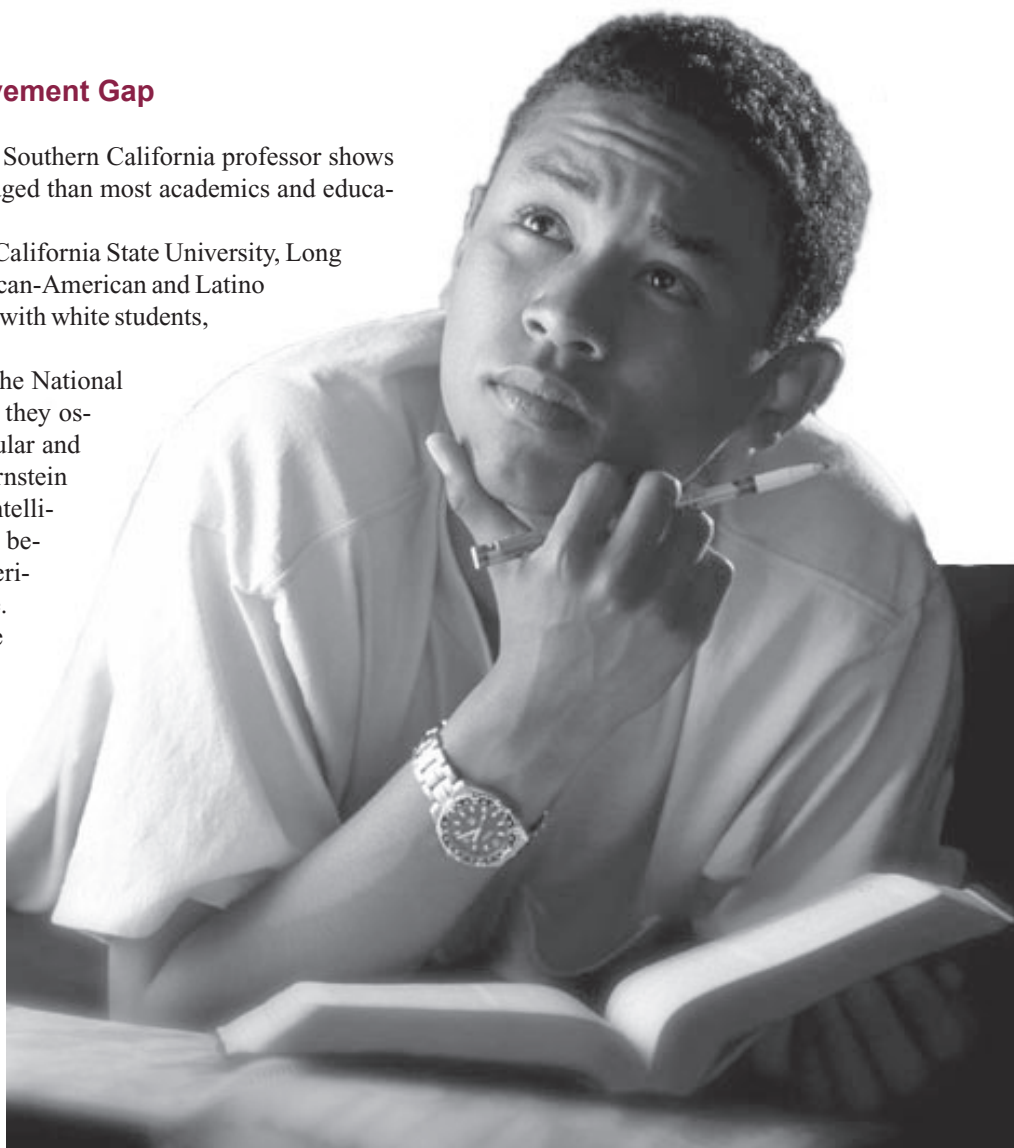
William Jeynes, professor of education at California State University, Long Beach, found that when highly religious African-American and Latino students from intact families were compared with white students, the achievement gap disappeared.

The results were based on an analysis of the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), and they ostensibly refute assertions written in the popular and controversial book *The Bell Curve* by Herrnstein and Murray that biological differences in intelligence make the achievement gap that exists between white students and their African-American and Latino counterparts insurmountable.

“The conviction held by some that the achievement gap is virtually immovable is inaccurate and misguided,” said Jeynes. “Religious faith and intact and stable family units are two resources that enable youth of color to achieve at the same levels of white students.”

Jeynes asserts that it is intriguing that it is not school factors but rather personal faith and parental family structure that were the salient factors associated with eliminating the achievement gap. ■

Read the study at www.religjournal.com.





Ending the Reading War

Would State-by-State Battles be Better?

By Mike Petrilli

Jonathan Rauch, in a recent *Atlantic* magazine article, proposed one way to end the culture wars: “slug them out state by state.” He points to the cautionary tale of *Roe v. Wade*, which nationalized an intensely controversial issue.

Are there lessons here for the reading wars? They too seemed intractable at one point, but by the late 1990s, following the trail first blazed by Jeanne Chall thirty years earlier, a consensus coalesced around the National Reading Panel and its “scientifically based reading research,” at least among reading scientists. The research-based approach was comprehensive (not merely phonics) but clear about what does and doesn’t work (just immersing kids in literature doesn’t, especially for those youngsters in greatest need of help in learning to read). Groups on the left (such as the AFT) and right (such as Fordham) promulgated these ideas and gave them political cover. And several states began to incorporate the research into their policies.

The “consensus,” of course, was limited to people who actually understood reading science and took it seriously—and those policymakers, publishers, and practitioners who took them seriously. Nonstop guerilla fighting also continued.

Then came Reading First.

Surveying a national landscape that was trending toward research-based reading practices but not fast enough, the federal government sought to end the state-by-state, ed-school-by-ed-school, association-by-association reading wars with a focused, well-funded, heavy-handed but effective

approach. Based on what we know today, one could fairly argue that the program has been both a clear success in terms of student reading gains and a massive failure in terms of sustaining, much less widening, the reading-education consensus. Reading First became a big fat target for “whole language” fundamentalists and guerillas—publishers whose products could show no evidence of effectiveness and ed school ideologues happy to rail against science. Now these folks are coming into possession of heavier artillery, pressuring the Department of Education’s Inspector General and Congressional committees to fire away on their behalf, seeding anti-scientific articles in the *New York Times*, and otherwise escalating the reading wars-cum-culture-wars. Once again, the reading debate has entered, in Rauch’s words, the “realm of protest politics, which rejects compromise and fosters radicalism.”

Return to Normal Politics

Is there any way of returning reading to the “realm of normal politics, which cuts deals and develops consensus”? Should we “slug it out state by state”? That approach holds some appeal. A federal focus on “whatever works”—being demanding about the results to be achieved in terms of student learning but agnostic as to particular teaching strategies—is more in line with Washington’s limited capacity to influence schools that are two or three steps removed from its power. Reading First’s “what works” approach requires much more federal prescription than our education system is accustomed to; political pushback was inevitable.

Individuals like former Reading First director Chris Doherty are caught in the crossfire. Doherty was impugned for conscientiously doing what Congress and the President asked him to do: make sure that federal dollars flow only to scientifically based programs. His only true blunder was being candid in a series of e-mails about how he was going about it.

National Standards

If we had decent national standards and tests (which would indeed mean short-circuiting state-by-state debates about what students should learn and thus likely cause wars of its own), maybe the feds could then allow local flexibility in how students learn. If we added national standards and tests that measured results, Washington could use a lighter hand with regard to means. And if some states (or their districts and schools) foreswear scientifically based reading strategies, the results will be clear in their reading test scores.

That strategy would make more sense if scientifically based research had a fair chance in a state-by-state fight. It may not. The reading wars have raged for more than half a century; by all accounts, ed school professors and their soul mates and trainees in state education departments and local school districts are still in the thrall of whole language. Maybe the National Reading Panel was merely a high-point for the scientifically based reading crowd, not a sign of things to come.

Furthermore, while this debate is primarily a fight between fundamentalism (whole language) and science, there’s also big money at stake. Purveyors of whole language programs have a strong incentive to fight to the end. Say what you will about partisans in the abortion or gay marriage debates, they certainly aren’t motivated by money. Maybe the reading wars aren’t fundamentally a culture war, after all. ■



Mike Petrilli is Vice President for National Programs and Policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. He served in the U.S. Department of Education.



Action Alert: Employee Ballots to Be Made Public

The Democrat majority in Congress did not waste any time once in control of both the House and the Senate to introduce the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), a bill that would make it easier for unions to organize school district employees. Ironically, the cleverly titled bill does anything but give workers a free choice.

EFCA is supported by big labor and for good reason: it helps unions easily pick up new members in an era of declining union membership. The bill furthermore appears to be a payback by Congress because Big Labor helped Democrats gain control of Congress.

Under EFCA, a worker's right to vote in a democratic secret ballot election is revoked. In place of a secret ballot election, an organizing tactic known as "card check" is imposed on any work sector that the union decides should be unionized.

Under card check, unions are required to get 50 percent plus one of the employees in a company or school district to sign a card indicating that they would like the union to represent them. Once the majority is obtained, a union is established and 100 percent of the employees become union members – whether all employees want union representation.

There's more bad news. EFCA would be a federal law, meaning it's the law of the land. Moreover, there is no restriction on the amount of time a union has to collect the required signatures for card check; therefore, the angst of employees is prolonged as they worry about their fate. To get the required signatures needed for a majority, union leaders often subject employees to pressure and intimidation.

Numerous amendments were introduced by Republican members of Congress in an effort to make EFCA have some semblance of fairness. All of the amendments, however, were rejected by the Democrats on the House Education and Labor Committee, and therefore are not included in EFCA. The amendments would have:

- Required that a union return a signed authorization card to an employee within five days of his or her request.
- Demanded a union demonstrate that all cards signed in a card check campaign were signed only by U.S. citizens or legal immigrants.
- Allowed an employee to put himself or herself on a "do not contact" list in order to avoid in-person solicitation from the union during card check campaigns.
- Ensured that no employee can be forced to join a union or pay union dues as condition of employment.
- Stipulated that penalties against employers who coerce em-

ployees during a card check campaign would also apply to union members who coerce employees during the campaign.

- Required that the anonymity of any employee who requests his or her authorization card be returned from the union be preserved in order to protect him or her from coercion and possible retribution.
- Dictated that if a union can be certified by using card check, then the union could be decertified via card check. Ironically, Big Labor has insisted that decertifications be done solely by secret ballot in order to preserve privacy and independence.

While the Democratic members of Congress, plus a few Republicans, are lining up to show their support for EFCA, their enthusiasm is not representative of the American public. A recent poll by McLaughlin & Associates found that 87 percent of Americans support an employee's right to a secret ballot.

The EFCA has already passed the U.S. House of Representatives, so it is now up to the Senate to protect American employees' democratic rights. If you oppose the EFCA, contact your Senator today and tell him or her to vote no on the Employee Free Choice Act.

To find contact information for your Senator, please go to http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm.

Hearing on Supplemental Services under NCLB

On April 18th, the U.S. House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education held a hearing titled, "Supplemental Educational Services Under the No Child Left Behind Act: How to Improve Quality and Access." Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) students who attend public schools that have not reached adequate yearly progress for three consecutive years are eligible to take advantage of free supplemental educational services (SES), such as private tutoring. However, many parents do not use these services because they are not informed of them quickly and efficiently.

Unlike most of the nation, in Newport News, VA, 68 percent of the families that are eligible for SES take advantage of the program. This is far above the national average. Officials there credit the success of the SES programs to the close partnership between the Newport News schools and the SES providers.

Amy Chafin, the Maryland Assistant State Superintendent for Student, Family and School Support, has seen similar success with SES programs in her state. She stated, "By streamlining the process and enlisting the help of individual school in informing parents of the SES options under the law, Maryland parents have become more engaged in the process." ■

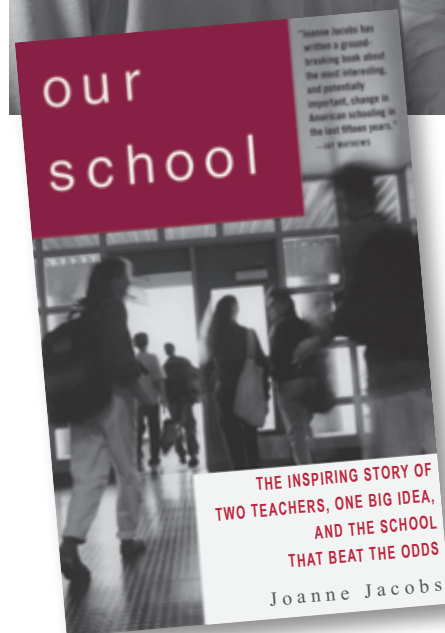
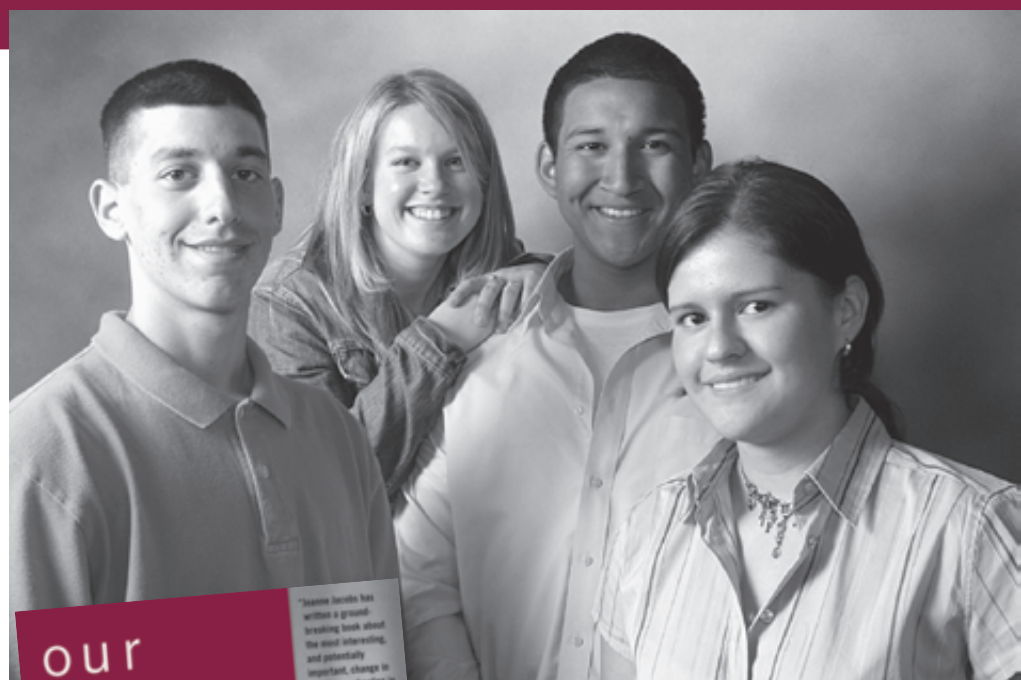
Inspirational Summer Reading

One school that rose to the challenge

Honest, engaging, and inspiring, *Our School* is a must read for all teachers—especially those working with at-risk children!

Written by award-winning columnist Joanne Jacobs, *Our School* tells the story of Downtown College Prep, a public charter high school in San Jose that recruits underachieving students and promises to prepare them for four-year colleges and universities. The average student enters ninth grade with fifth-grade reading and math skills. Many have slid through school without doing homework. Some barely speak English.

Tracking the innovative and pioneering program, Joanne Jacobs follows the young principal who tries to shake the hand of every student each day, the dedicated teachers who inspire teens to break free from their histories of failure, and the immigrant parents who fight to protect their children from gangs. Capturing our hearts are the students who overcome tremendous odds: Roberto, who struggles to learn English; Larissa, a young mother; Pedro, who signals every mood change with a different hair cut; Selena, who is determined to use college as her escape from drudgery; the girls of the very short, never-say-die basketball team; and the Tech Challenge competitors. Some will give up on their dreams. Those who stick



with the school will go on to college.

This gritty yet hopeful book provides a new understanding of what makes a school work and how desire, pride, and community—*ganas, orgullo, and comunidad*—can put students on track for success in life.

“Our School is wonderfully written and wonderfully informative. I cannot think of another book that provides such a close and honest look at a successful school serving immigrant kids in grave danger of striking out in American life. The fascinating story that Joanne Jacobs tells zips along like a good novel, but it also delivers an important and optimistic message to educators who want to rescue kids.”

—Abigail Thernstrom, Co-author of *No Excuses* and *America in Black and White*

For those of you who still get a summer break from teaching, this book will inspire you to get back at it this fall.

Our School, by Joanne Jacobs, published by Palgrave Macmillan, is available on Amazon.com or at your local bookstore.