

BUILD TRUST, BANISH FEAR



In his new book *Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire*, Rafe Esquith shares the most essential teaching tool.

When we think of teachers who exemplify the profession, who not only have the respect of their students and school community, but also their colleagues across the nation, Rafe Esquith is at the top of the list.

Esquith has taught for 23 years at Hobart Boulevard Elementary School in Los Angeles. In a neighborhood plagued by gangs, guns, and drugs, his is a special classroom known as Room 56. Within its walls, children living in poverty play Vivaldi concertos, perform unabridged plays by Shakespeare, and go on to attend top universities.

In 2003, President Bush presented Esquith with the National Medal of Arts. He is the only teacher ever to receive this honor (but hopefully not the last). In addition, Esquith is the author of *There Are No Shortcuts*. In his new book, *Teach Like Your Hair's On Fire*:

The Methods and Madness Inside Room 56 (Viking Penguin, 2007), Esquith reveals many of the techniques that have made him one of the most acclaimed educators of our time.

But while his honors and books have pushed him into the public realm, Esquith's heart remains in the classroom. He still teaches every day in Room 56. In fact, his is one of the few education books written by "an actual classroom teacher," as is stated on the cover.

Here's a preview of what Esquith has to say about avoiding fear, building classroom trust, and what it means to teach with your hair on fire. Read on:

AN EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK...

"There is more than one way to run a successful classroom—from using the philosophy of Thoreau to the philosophy of Mussolini. Over the last 25 years, I've tried practically everything to deal with

the often maddening behavior of children in a school environment that accepts graffiti-covered walls and urine-soaked bathroom floors as normal.

Visitors to Room 56 never come away most impressed with the academic ability of the children, the style in which I present lessons, or the cleverness of the wall decorations. They come away shaking their heads over something else: the culture of the classroom. It's calm. It is incredibly civil. It's an oasis. But something is missing. Ironically, Room 56 is a special place not because of what it has, but because of what it is missing: fear.

In my early years, I actually planned to frighten the kids the first day of school. I wanted to make sure they knew I was boss. Some of my colleagues did the same, and we shared our supposed successes in getting the kids in order. Other classes were out of control, and we foolishly congratulated one another on our quiet classrooms and orderly children.

Then one day, many years ago, I watched a fantastic video featuring a first-rate teacher who told a story about his son and the Boston Red Sox. He had inherited a priceless baseball signed by all the players of the legendary 1967 Sox. When his young son asked to play catch with him, of course he warned the boy that they could never use that ball. Upon being asked why, the teacher realized that Carl Yastrzemski, Jim Lonborg, and the rest of the 1967 Sox meant nothing to his son. Instead of taking the time to explain, however, he simply told the boy they could not use the ball "because it had writing all over it."

A few days later, the boy once again asked his father to play catch. When his father reminded him that they could not use the ball with the writing, his son informed him that he had solved the problem: He had licked off the writing!

Of course the father was ready to kill his own son. On second thought, however, he realized his boy had done nothing wrong. And from that day forward, the teacher carried the unsigned baseball with him everywhere he went. It reminded him that, when teaching or parenting, you must always try to see things >>>

a teacher's story

from the child's point of view and never use fear as a shortcut for education.

Painful though it was, I had to admit that many children in my class were behaving the way they were because they were afraid. Oh, lots of kids liked the class and quite a few learned all sorts of wonderful lessons. But I wanted more.

We spend so much time trying to raise

reading and math scores. We push our kids to run faster and jump higher. Shouldn't we also try to help them become better human beings? In fact, all these years later, I've recognized that by improving the culture of my classroom, the ordinary challenges are navigated far more easily. It's not easy to create a classroom without fear. It can take years.

But it's worth it. Here's what I do to ensure the class remains a place of academic excellence without resorting to fear to keep the kids in line.

REPLACE FEAR WITH TRUST

On the first day of school, I discuss this issue with the children. While most classrooms are based on fear, our classroom is based on trust. The children hear the words and like them, but they are only words. It is deeds that will help the children see that I not only talk the talk but walk the walk.

I use the following example with the students on the first day. Most of us have participated in the trust exercise in which you fall back and are caught by a peer. Even if the catch is made a hundred times in a row, the trust is broken if the friend lets you fall the next time as a joke. Even if he swears he is sorry and will never let you fall again, you can never fall back without a seed of doubt.

My students learn that a broken trust is irreparable. Everything else can be fixed. Miss your homework assignment? Just tell me, accept the fact that you messed up, and we can move on. Did you break something? It happens; we can take care of it. But break my trust and the rules change. Our relationship will be okay, but it will never be what it once was. Of course kids do break trust, and they should be given an opportunity to earn it back. But it takes time. The kids are proud of the trust I give them, and they do not want to lose it. They rarely do, and I make sure on a daily basis that I deserve the trust I ask of them.

I answer all questions. It does not matter if I have been asked them before. It does not matter if I am tired. The kids must see that I passionately want them to understand, and it never bothers me when they don't. During an interview, a student named Alan once told a reporter, "Last year, I tried to ask my teacher a question. She became angry and said, 'We've been over this. You weren't listening!' But I was listening! I just didn't get it! Rafe will go over something five hundred times until I understand." □

REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION FROM *TEACH LIKE YOUR HAIR'S ON FIRE*, BY RAFE ESQUITH (VIKING PENGUIN, 2007).

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Q&A With Rafe Esquith



Q. *I have to ask—where did the title come from?*

A. Several years ago I accidentally set my hair on fire while teaching a chemistry experiment. I was so determined to help a little girl that I didn't realize my hair was smoldering as I was lighting her alcohol lamp. I promised myself then to always teach like my hair was on fire—to stay so focused that nothing would prevent me from giving my all every day.

Q. *Have you ever had a student you just can't seem to reach?*

A. I have kids like this every year. But we never *really* know if we haven't reached them. My job is to send a message of kindness while pushing for excellence. There are children who I thought I had failed who did amazing things years later.

Q. *Have you ever considered leaving teaching to do something else?*

A. There are many nights when law school seems attractive. I talk myself back into the classroom by thinking about Atticus Finch. He enters the courtroom knowing he will lose. I have to be the same way. The classroom is the courtroom, and I will lose all the time. Still, I teach the children that Room 56 is an important place. If I leave, I've lied to them, and I can't do that. And there is always a child whose progress lights the way.

Q. *How do you feel about testing?*

A. I hope that *Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire* encourages teachers to focus on what really matters and stand up to the forces that are ruining education while hypocritically pretending to care about the children. Tests are important, but nowhere near as important as helping children grow into strong, decent human beings.

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