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Bringing Passion to a California School

Review:

Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire! The Methods and Madness Inside Room 56

By Rafe Esquith

Esquith might be the only public school teacher to be honored by both Oprah Winfrey and the Dalai Lama; he is the only school teacher ever to receive the president's National Medal of the Arts. For the past 25 years, Esquith has taught fifth graders at Hobart Elementary in central Los Angeles. Like most progressive educators, Esquith is outraged by the tyranny of testing, the scripting of teaching under "No Child Left Behind" and the overwhelming bureaucratization of the education industry. Still, he's done wonders with the basic curriculum—developing a hands-on arts program, a money-management curriculum and a sports-based statistics unit. Esquith and his Hobart Shakespeareans are world famous for the rock opera they create every year. Throughout each school day, Esquith teaches life skills: how to think about problems, how to plan a strategy to solve them and, most important, how to work together and be nice to each other. While his goals are inspiring, he's also practical—most chapters include affordable, how-to directions for a variety of his most effective classroom activities; he's even got a few tips for revamping those inescapable "test prep" sessions.

Interview

In his book *Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire*, Rafe Esquith offers advice for teachers.

Does your new book build on your first, *There Are No Shortcuts?*

After the first book, I got thousands of questions on how to get from point A to point B, the "nuts and bolts." With this book, I want teachers to say, "Yes, I can do it." It's like a cookbook: I'm offering recipes teachers can add to their menus. Doing this book, I read a lot of what young teachers are reading. I found it disturbing that these books are all

about *control*– making sure all your lines are straight and all the children are listening. I want to set the bar higher and talk about really educating our children.

What do you advise the teacher who's not allowed to be creative–she's being evaluated on her students' test scores, and she's required to teach to a script in math and reading?

First, you play by the rules–otherwise you'll be fired and you won't be *any* kind of teacher. I jump through hoops all the time. For instance, today I have to give an absurd reading test that's not going to help the students–we won't even get the results back! But I'm going to do it, because I'm paid to. Still, this book shows you there are things you can do. The Marcy Cook math tiles, for instance, are fantastic and cost just \$30 a year–you can easily use these to supplement any state math curriculum.

So do what's required, and then add the good stuff?

Absolutely. The second section of the book–the Method–is useful for people who want to be good teachers, but can't give up their entire lives. I'm saying, from 8 to 3, let's give it your best shot–let's not just phone it in.

How do you get the energy to work 12 hours a day, 12 months a year?

When you work really hard with the kids, they start to become the people you enjoy being around. There's a tactile energy level in my classroom that's phenomenal! But sure, I'm tired all the time. And I have bad days when things don't work. I write about that too, because I'm tired of reading books that say, "Oh, if you just do these three things, the child will learn." It's not true. When people come to my class, the one thing they notice is the kids' independence, the way they show initiative. They do the right thing even when the teacher's not around. To me, that's the measure of good teaching.