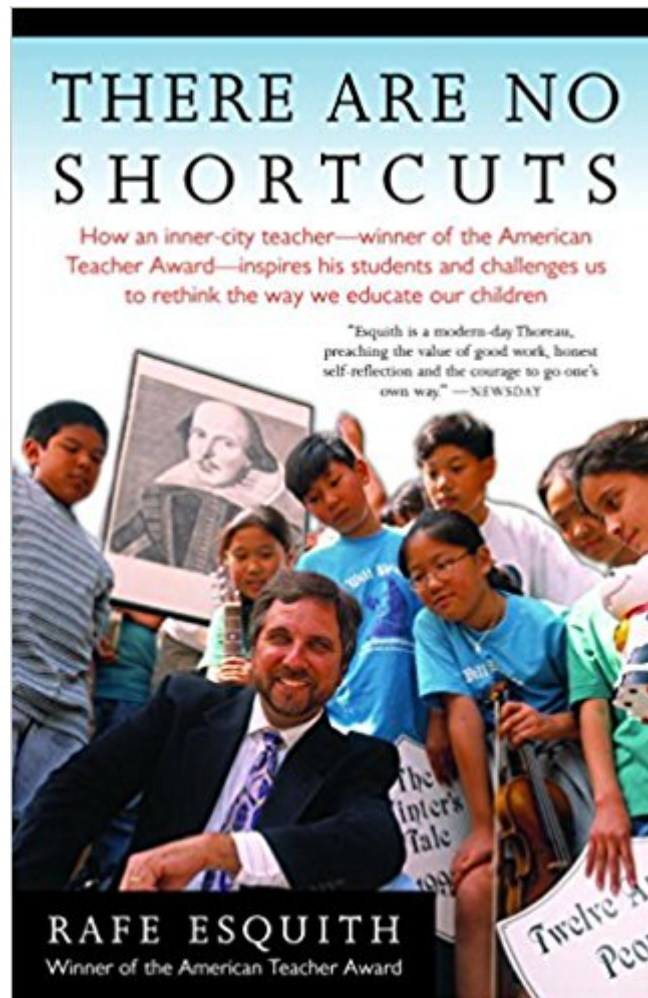


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There Are No Shortcuts



Synopsis

Year after year, Rafe Esquith's fifth-grade students excel. They read passionately, far above their grade level; tackle algebra; and stage Shakespeare so professionally that they often wow the great Shakespearean actor himself, Sir Ian McKellen. Yet Esquith teaches at an L.A. innercity school known as the Jungle, where few of his students speak English at home, and many are from poor or troubled families. What's his winning recipe? A diet of intensive learning mixed with a lot of kindness and fun. His kids attend class from 6:30 A.M. until well after 4:00 P.M., right through most of their vacations. They take field trips to Europe and Yosemite. They play rock and roll. Mediocrity has no place in their classroom. And the results follow them for life, as they go on to colleges such as Harvard, Princeton, and Stanford. Possessed by a fierce idealism, Esquith works even harder than his students. As an outspoken maverick of public education (his heroes include Huck Finn and Atticus Finch), he admits to significant mistakes and heated fights with administrators and colleagues. We all "teachers, parents, citizens" have much to learn from his candor and uncompromising vision.

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Customer Reviews

After I saw a documentary about Rafe Esquith, I decided to read "There Are No Shortcuts," in which this unique educator gives his perspective on the rewards, challenges, and disappointments of teaching in a Los Angeles public school. Esquith has two decades under his belt fighting entrenched bureaucrats who prefer conformity to individuality. During his years in Hobart Elementary School, he has taught inner-city children Shakespeare and other works of classic literature as well as advanced

mathematics and music. In addition, he has given his students the skills and the confidence to achieve more than they ever dreamed was possible. All of this comes at a price. Esquith almost went bankrupt paying for the materials that he needed to support his curriculum, and he ended up in the hospital after putting in long hours with little sleep. He still works from dawn to dusk, as well as on Saturdays and school holidays, but he attempts to avoid burnout by occasionally taking some time off to relax with his family. One of Esquith's mottos is "work hard, be nice." He certainly works hard, but he is not always nice in his criticism of the educational establishment. He skewers incompetent and indifferent teachers and administrators, ridicules irrational and obstructive rules and regulations, and even has a few harsh words for his own union, which he has supported over the years. Anything or anyone who prevents an educator from doing whatever he can to bring out the best in every student gets thumbs down from Esquith.

I ran into this book at a used book store five hours ago and have been reading it since, rapt. I had never heard of this guy, but since I am becoming a teacher I found his insider account of finding success in a tough school intriguing. And the book is never boring. Also, I'm sure many of the kids he taught benefited from his passion, creativity, fundraising abilities and personal largesse with his time and (modest) income. Honestly, though, the guy is a nut. At one point he takes the older kids on a 31-day tour of 25 college campuses?!?! Is that really necessary? Useful? Wouldn't three or four have sufficed? At another point he is working crappy second, third and fourth jobs to buy presents for the kids and take them on trips. When a father is shot in the neck, he practically moves in with the wife and daughter -- and then is surprised when he doesn't get a thank you note ... maybe he inspired some jealousy?! He stares down murderers, takes on LA Unified any chance he gets -- by the end I was waiting for him to drive up the stairs on a motorcycle like Jim Belushi in "The Principal." After all, he's teaching at what he describes as "The Jungle" (which seems a bit extreme a name for even the roughest K-5!) The guy's martyr/megalomania level is off the charts. He so desperately needs to be these kids' uber-father figure, it's genuinely scary. And despite the occasional bone he throws other teachers, he is very clear that NOBODY is even in his league as a teacher. Plus, he has set up his class where his kids are constantly performing to public acclaim, which then reflects back on the director. Furthermore, he glosses over so many issues to make his story sexier.

Rafe Esquivel has an amazing classroom going in California. Here he gives some episodes and advice for young teachers seeking to build off of his success. Rafe transitioned from an elite district

to an underprivileged elementary school and struggled to reconcile doing all for his students with overcoming district resistance. He does not mince words on his dislike for administrators. He's pretty transparent with his personal flaws. Many teachers spend out of their own pockets to help their students. Rafe admits taking this to extreme and self-destructive levels with his desires to take kids on class trips. Eventually he stresses himself out to the point where he endangers his students and he takes a much needed break to recharge. Like most teacher books, Rafe's deep attachments to his students comes through. Most of the time, his relationships lead to challenging his students to positively go beyond their expectations and exceed their potential. Rafe also shares a couple of episodes where students took advantage of him and how he's learned to set more appropriate boundaries for necessary self-preservation. Ultimately, Rafe's classroom takes off and he gains support of famous Shakespearean actors and the trust of his students. He puts in gargantuan hours but his students rise to the challenge and succeed academically and eventually go on to professional success. He develops some very creative systems such as classroom currency to motivate students. I also applaud him for establishing a real classroom community where past students actively participate in after school and before school hours.

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