

# Follow in Rafe Esquith's footsteps

Spark students' interest—and your own—to make learning dynamic

In September, educators participating in the ATPE Book Circle began reading and discussing *There Are No Shortcuts* by Rafe Esquith. Esquith, who was the keynote speaker at the 2009 ATPE state convention, is famous for his “no shortcuts” teaching style. In Room 56, his inner-city Los Angeles classroom, class begins at 6:30 a.m., and fifth-graders not only read Shakespeare's plays but also perform them. Esquith is also the author of *Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire*.

You get the picture: Esquith is a go-getter, the kind of teacher who doesn't let anything get in the way of doing what he thinks will energize and stimulate his students. Most teachers have a knack for dramatizing humdrum content, but if spicing things up doesn't come naturally to you, fear not. The year is still fresh, and there is still plenty of time to take some simple steps à la Rafe Esquith toward making your classroom a laboratory of energetic, hands-on learning.

A caveat: Be sure to discuss your ideas for classroom visitors and field trips with your administrator before putting them into action.

## 1 STEP 1: Look outside for sources

Bringing a supplemental activity to your classroom (or taking students to the source) will require you to relinquish your teacher hat and put on your organizer/planner hat. The good news is most teachers already do this when they plan their daily lessons. The difference here is that on the day of the supplemental activity, you will be the host, and someone else will be the teacher.

## 2 STEP 2: Tap into your passion

Start with an idea that revolves around something you know and about which you are passionate. Think about how you



can relate your idea to the curriculum you must present, and voilà, you have the framework for your classroom event.

## 3 STEP 3: Prioritize planning

Whether you are inviting a guest to your classroom or taking the kids on the road, a good plan will go far toward ensuring success. Here are some ideas for field trips and classroom visits that can be arranged in most communities:

**Civic buildings**—Yes, fire stations have timeless appeal, but don't underestimate the excitement of a field trip to city hall to meet the mayor or city council members. They might not have fancy red trucks, but you will be surprised to see the depth visiting such officials can bring to your age-old civics lesson. Similarly, you could visit judges and attorneys at the courthouse. Schedule time for a Q-and-A

with some key players, and you have an interactive learning experience. Let's face it: Kids love the real thing!

### Musicians, scientists and engineers—

If they have the title, they carry the credentials, and your students will love the opportunity to explore the possibilities of following one of these career paths themselves. An added bonus: These experts will come to you rather than your having to go to them. A musician can bring her instrument to play for students, and a scientist or engineer is sure to reinforce some of your Science TEKS objectives. Have students prepare for such a classroom visit by writing questions for the guest ahead of time.

**Colleges and universities**—A leisurely stroll on a college campus is excellent motivation for pursuing higher education. Amazingly, kids often live near college

## BOOK CIRCLE:

# Passion or content— which has more impact?

campuses but never actually go into the buildings. Universities are great places to bring kids for a wide array of stimulating experiences.

**Businesses**—Nurseries make great physical science labs, and local shops, from grocery stores to hardware stores, give kids real-life exposure to and applications for basic math skills. Ask the store manager ahead of time to go over simple things, such as how the store orders supplies and accounts for sales.

Remember to explore public transportation options for arriving at your destination. For instance, in the Metroplex, not only will Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) work with you to arrange field trip transportation, but DART will also send a special guest speaker to your classroom. (Visit [www.dart.org/transiteducation/transiteducation.asp](http://www.dart.org/transiteducation/transiteducation.asp) to learn more.)

If a traditional field trip is not feasible, consider a virtual trip. Webcams are set up in interesting spots worldwide. Give students a 360-degree tour of London's famous sites at <http://virtuallondontour.com>, or take them on a virtual African safari at [www.africam.com/wildlife](http://www.africam.com/wildlife). Do your homework as webcams are sometimes unpredictable. One day they are on; the next they are not.

### 4 STEP 4: Enjoy yourself

On the day of the event, sit back, and watch the fruits of your labor ignite the intellectual curiosity of your students. To wrap up the event, have your students write thank-you notes—a great social courtesy that is, in and of itself, a beneficial learning activity. ➔

The ATPE Book Circle, one of ATPE's newest professional development opportunities, began its third book study in September. Book Circle participants receive continuing professional education (CPE) credit for reading a selected book and responding weekly to discussion questions posted on the Idea Exchange. This fall, participants studied *There Are No Shortcuts* by Rafe Esquith. The second discussion question prompted impassioned responses.

*In Chapters 3 and 4, Esquith explores the idea that tapping into the personal passion of the teacher in presenting content is more important to the success of teaching than the passive presentation of any specific content. He states: "The material is less important than the teacher's level of excitement." What do you think of this assertion, and how, as an educator, do you enhance content with excitement in your classroom?*

"When I use a 'canned' approach that does not utilize my own experiences, the enthusiasm wanes, and so does the learning."

—SHERYL BURNETT, music teacher, Brock ISD

"I think it is very true that if we are passionate about a subject, then our students are more open to learning about it. I disagree with Mr. Esquith on one point, however. As a high school English teacher, I deliberately use books (especially classic or popular ones) that I do not personally like. I explain to the kids that I don't like the book for some vague reason. After they have read the book, we discuss what they—and I—did or did not like about the book. I think this is important because students get to see that sometimes we do things because they are required of us, even though we don't want to do them, and—more importantly—it's OK to disagree about things."

—KAREN CUNNINGHAM, English and theater arts teacher, West Sabine ISD

"I am definitely a passionate teacher, but I do not agree with Rafe that it is the *material* about which we should be passionate. It is the *kids!* What we teach matters, but it is *whom* we teach that matters more."

—ELIZABETH BOYD, English teacher, Kerrville ISD

