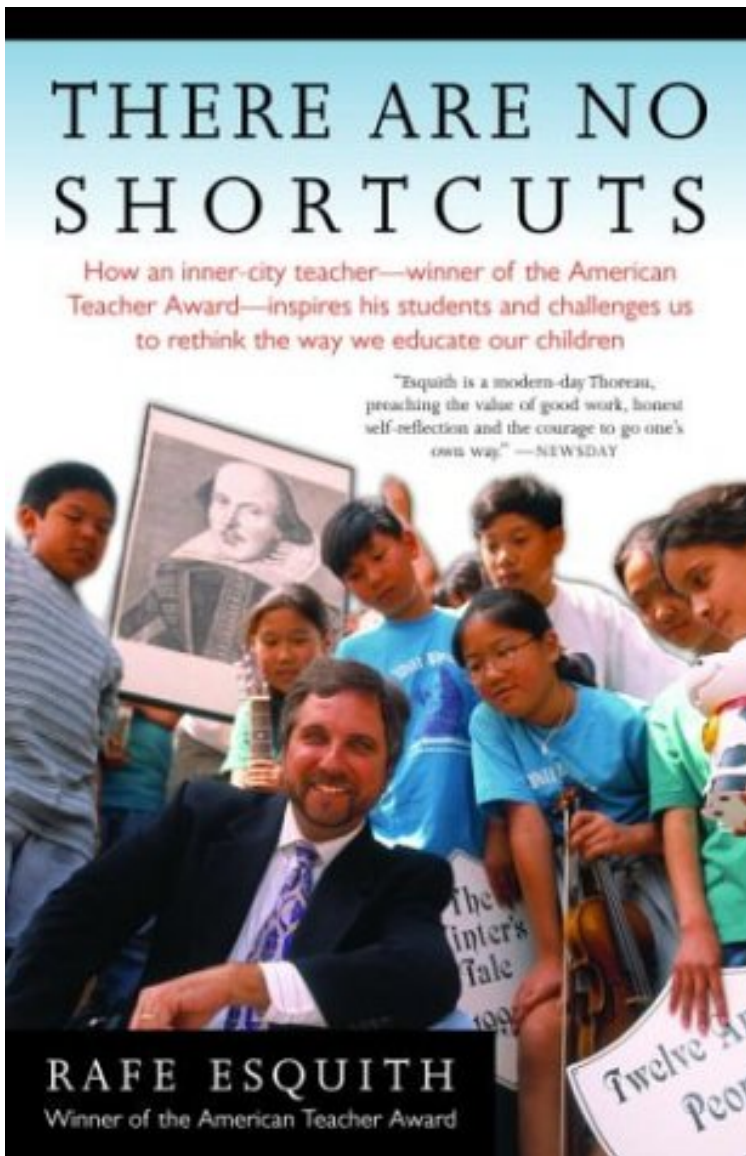


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There Are No Shortcuts



Par Rafe Esquith
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurYear after year, Rafe Esquiths 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 Shakespearan 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. Whats 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. From the Trade Paperback edition. Extrait Chapter 1 Curtains It's dangerous to think too much about public education. So many things are wrong with it that it's easier simply to go on a search-and-destroy mission and write only about the horror of it all. Those of us who have survived school have plenty of scars. Any person who has taught for more than a few years has met administrators, teachers, parents, and children who, as Mark Twain once remarked, "make a body ashamed of the human race." That's not my mission here. More than anything else, this book is meant to be a reminder of what public education can be. But to understand where we might consider going, it becomes painfully necessary to examine some things that we usually try to avoid. I have one more objective, too: I want to give hope to young teachers who would like to run against the wind but are afraid of the consequences. I am living proof that you can have success as a teacher despite the many forces that are working against you. Like the Founding Fathers, I am a lover of independence, and freethinkers are not fashionable in public schools today. Instead, as public schools fail, bureaucrats are attempting to solve serious problems with simplistic solutions. They're afraid to examine the real reasons why our schools are failing, so they use fashionable words or pretty new textbooks to try and solve the very real problems that are destroying our classrooms. Poverty, greed, and incompetent teaching are just some of the reasons why Johnny not only can't read but has no interest in reading. Using a new reading series or changing the classroom environment isn't going to solve our problems. Most tragic of all, many districts are trying to take charge of education by forcing all teachers to use uniform lesson plans, by which all students will be guided in the same way at the same pace. This may be a comfort to young teachers who aren't sure what to do every day, but I already know the inevitable result of uniform teaching: things will continue to be uniformly terrible. I've never been one of the masses, either as a parent or as a teacher. I will not let advertisers persuade me to see mediocre movies, and I do not watch a television show in order to converse with peers about it the following day. My life is my own. I don't feel I have to buy in to the popular culture in order to be a successful teacher, parent, or person. But there are those to whom fitting in with the majority is important, and I have respect for that path; it's just not the one I can follow, and these people may find the lessons I've learned irrelevant for their journey. However, if you're a young teacher or parent who has often wanted to break from the pack but has been afraid to do so, I can tell you that I've done so and am still standing. I have many scars and bruises, but I have, as Robert Frost tells us, taken the road less traveled. And it's made all the difference. Most teachers who are honest look back on their first years in the classroom through half-closed eyes. Teaching is a tough job at any time, and I've yet to meet anyone who excelled at it from the start. It takes years of experience to develop the wisdom that can lead to being a first-rate teacher. I was definitely a slow learner, and I had an interesting but painful experience when I was student-teaching in UCLA's Graduate School of Education program. I thought I was doing a pretty good job and was vigorously supported by the master teacher who supervised my work in her sixth-grade classroom. She particularly liked the reading program I designed for the students, most of whom spoke Spanish as their primary language. Rather than using the boring school reader assigned by the school district, I'd been reading the classics with these kids, and their reading and enthusiasm for literature increased enormously. For our final project of the year, we read *Romeo and Juliet*. My plan was to take the kids to the Franco Zeffirelli film on a weekend. It was playing in a revival house that showed classic films (this was before video made the showing of movies in class much easier). The children got very excited about this trip and read *Romeo and Juliet* with gusto. They were devastated on the Friday we finished when our principal sent me a note telling me he had heard about my plan but that it was strictly forbidden to take students out on a Saturday. He went on to threaten that if the trip went ahead as planned, I would not receive a positive evaluation at the end of my student-teaching assignment. I was furious and just crumpled up his note. I had worked for two months to get the kids ready for this trip. Their parents were supportive, and many of them were coming to the movie with their children. I couldn't believe the head of a school would want to prevent his kids from having a rewarding climax to their experience with Shakespeare. Looking back, I laugh at myself that a decision like that surprised me. I was so young. I stormed into the office, gave the crumpled note to the principal's secretary, and told her to tell him where he could stick it. That afternoon, when I arrived at UCLA for my education classes, I was informed by one of the instructors that I had been suspended until a committee could decide if I had the moral character to be a good teacher. The fact that the movie trip was canceled was the least of my problems. I went home too angry

to cry, and terrified at the thought of never teaching again. I had spent much of my life planning to be a teacher and now I had to consider the possibility that because of this stupid incident I might have to do something truly awful, like go to law school. This frustration was exacerbated when I received my first lesson in educational hypocrisy. There were rumors that the principal who was angry with me was having an affair with one of the teachers (they were both married), and that she was pregnant. Now, I'm no saint, but it was hard to have my moral integrity judged by this hypocrite. To make a long story short, they allowed me to go on being a teacher if I completely discounted the last six months of student teaching and repeated them. To punish me, they had me supervised by a struggling new teacher who had often come to me for assistance when we were attending class together the previous year. Despite her self-acknowledged shortcomings as a classroom leader, she graduated on time and got a job immediately. Well, I give them credit: if their goal was to humble me and teach me my place, they did so. I learned quickly that I was in no position to talk back to principals. I wanted to be a teacher so desperately that I swallowed my pride, said all the right things, and received my teaching credential the following year. I was so glad to survive this ordeal that I didn't take the time to consider the lesson I should have been learning. I still mistakenly believed that this incident was an unusual one, and that when I was actually teaching and being paid for it, I'd be supervised by caring and able people who had dedicated their lives to the betterment of young human beings. I didn't realize that many people, who may be good people, feel that working in schools is just a job and not a holy mission. Instead, I was more interested in the fact that within the next two years, the principal who had written me the note went through a divorce; his wife had never forgiven him when his illegitimate child was born. Sadly, a year later he was diagnosed with cancer and died soon after. I had missed a crucial lesson here, but I would be given countless opportunities in the future to learn it. Public education is a mess, and I had survived my first scare by allowing the powers that be to force me to do exactly what they wanted. This is a natural danger for many young teachers. In truth, for many of us the initial objective is just to survive; we hope our lessons go smoothly and the clock runs quickly. For many novice teachers, there is no more wonderful sound than the dismissal bell signaling the end of the day. Consequently, in far too many classrooms the children's education is not the main objective. Older teachers often mentor the young ones by teaching them survival tips that are fine for the beginning teacher but not helpful to the student. As a result, many young teachers believe they're doing a good job when in fact they're using smoke and mirrors. They have beautifully decorated classrooms with all the school standards created by some bureaucrat hanging on the wall. Their kids walk in straight lines, and order carries the day. It is painful to reflect on this, because that was my classroom for the first couple of years, and I, too, thought I was doing a good job. What's more, the kids liked me. God, how foolish I feel now, remembering those desperate days. I actually worried more about the kids liking me than if they were reading well. But I was fortunate. I had planned to teach at a school in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood. Instead, I was assigned to a middle-class school with middle-class parents and middle-class values. There were only three hundred children at this school, and everybody spoke English. The kids had private music lessons at home. Everyone was on a soccer team or in a drama club or in an orchestra on Saturdays. They went to school liking their teachers before they had met them. I used to joke with my friends and tell them that I taught at a school called Camelot. I felt wonderful, until one day, by accident, a very nice little girl said something to me that started me down a different path. Our school was having a fund-raiser, and every teacher was supposed to contribute something for a silent auction. One teacher contributed tennis lessons; another was taking four kids to the movies. Since I loved Shakespeare, I planned a trip to the Old Globe Theater in San Diego for a group of about twenty-five students. The plan was for some parents, teachers, and me to drive the kids down for a weekend and two plays. The parents would pay for the trip and add about \$25 extra. In this way the trip made a profit for the school while the kids had a good time and learned something. And they did indeed. The trip ran like clockwork. We stayed at a beautiful hotel with a Hawaiian atmosphere. The kids swam in an Olympic-size pool in the afternoons and returned to their lovely and spacious rooms to change before dinner. We saw two terrific plays: *Rashomon* and a particularly hilarious *Merry Wives of Windsor*. A splendid time was had by all. It was Sunday afternoon and we were heading to the cars for our return to Los Angeles. Walking next to a perky little girl named Jenny, I said to her, "Wasn't this a fun weekend?" "It sure was, Rafe." "Gorgeous hotel," I remarked. "It was okay," Jenny answered vaguely. "It wasn't as nice as the ones I stay at in Hawaii and New York, but it was okay." It didn't hit me like a thunderbolt at first, but all during the drive back to L.A., I kept thinking about this little girl's reaction to our weekend. I thought I had done something unique; I had wanted these days to mean something special to these kids and I had worked very

hard to put it together. Yet the simple truth was that these were fortunate children who didn't need me doing this for them. I spent the next few weeks observing my co-workers. Some of them were very good teachers; others were at best adequate. The majority of them took the path of least resistance. They were working with kids who were practically on autopilot and they were quite content to lay out the school textbooks, follow along chapter by chapter, and go home to their soap operas and bridge games with their social lives in order and consciences clear. There's nothing wrong with this, of course, but it was wrong for me. As I was the new kid on the block, they often invited me out to dinner, and I started to realize that junior-high peer pressure was nothing compared to the pressures on teachers in an elementary school. "We read our books this way." "We teach history this way." "Do things this way, Rafe, and you'll get along well here." They were right. Not only would I get along well, but also, at a rich school, the parents give you expensive presents at Christmas and at the end of the year. I was being paid for something I enjoyed doing, and still had health insurance and three months a year off. That's a good gig, but I wasn't happy. I started losing sleep and coming to school with knots in my stomach. Finally I figured out why this was happening. Camelot was too pleased with itself. The kids were good, but they weren't that good. The school had a sort of 1950s feel to it, which was fine, but an occasional new idea was seen as a threat to the established order. Still, I never spoke up when I observed certain songs being sung or dances being performed, even though I knew I had ideas that might be better. I had learned my place. Unfortunately, I also learned, to my shock, that a few of my fellow teachers routinely cheated on standardized examinations to inflate test scores and build the school's reputation in the community. Early in my first year, I attended a staff meeting at which standardized tests were the main topic of discussion. In those days, children in California took an exam known as the SES, or Survey of Essential Skills. It was a very easy test assessing the most basic abilities. Children at Camelot were encouraged to get 100 percent on this test, and were given a "100%" button to wear around school if they did so. After the meeting, two highly respected teachers took me aside to show me a teaching technique that would help my students maximize their performance. This test was a multiple-choice exam for which the students blacked in the bubbles next to the answers on a computerized form. The teachers had a grid of bubbles that could be placed over a student's answer sheet, and this grid's holes revealed only the correct answers, so that a teacher could immediately spot how many questions had been missed. In some classes, when students announced they had finished their tests, they were told to come up to the teacher's desk. The teacher would use her grid and tell the student that he or she "had missed three-go back, find your mistakes, and return your paper again when you think you have 100 percent." "Isn't that cheating?" I asked timidly. "Of course not," one teacher replied testily. "I'm not telling the children the answer or which problem they missed-I'm simply encouraging them to get all the answers right. If they do, our school looks better when the scores are printed in the newspapers. And the higher our test scores, the more money we receive for various programs." I was too intimidated to talk back to this veteran, but I did summon the nerve to bring it up with my principal when we were alone in his office. I told him I could never administer a test that way, and planned just to encourage the kids to do their best; when they missed answers, it simply meant that I would have to reteach those skills. I hoped that was okay. My principal shook his head and said that while he knew where I was coming from, he nevertheless was disappointed with my stubborn refusal to see the big picture. He said I had a lot to learn. I guess I did. I learned one thing from testing my students honestly, though: I began to sleep better. I no longer had knots in my stomach when I came to school. But I didn't have the wisdom or sense to articulate to myself that I was beginning to define my mission as a teacher. I didn't see the forest for the trees. Yet even in those early years, I was thinking a lot like Huck Finn, one of my heroes. There's a marvelous section of Twain's great novel in which Huck is confronted with one of his many serious moral dilemmas. He has begun to feel guilty about helping Jim, a runaway slave, gain his freedom. As society has taught Huck to do, he decides to turn Jim in the first chance he gets. As their raft floats along, they come upon two men who capture runaway slaves for a living. Huck has his chance to betray Jim and follow the rules of society. Instead, at the last minute, he lies to the men and saves his friend. Later, he feels even guiltier, believing he has done wrong. Yet, he thinks to himself, would he have felt better if he had turned Jim in and done right? As Huck says, "What's the use you learning to do right, when it's troublesome to do right and ain't no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same? I was stuck. I couldn't answer that. So I reckoned I wouldn't bother no more about it, but after this always do whichever come handiest at the time." Over the years, I've often applied Huck's logic in my classroom, and been the better for it. I do not eat in the teachers' lunchroom; instead, during recess and lunch I've struggled but managed to teach hundreds of children how to play guitar and other instruments. When my district assigns textbooks to the children that would cure the

most seriously afflicted insomniac, I've used texts of my own choosing to inspire the children to dedicate themselves to their studies. While many teachers understandably go to after-school classes in order to earn credits leading to higher salaries, I've remained in my classroom for two hours a day after school to teach extra subjects. As many new teachers will admit about themselves, I was completely incompetent during my first few years in the classroom, but at least I figured out one thing. With apologies to Paul Anka and Frank Sinatra, I was going to do it my way. I discovered I wasn't going to be happy living a life to please others. I needed to live a life helping others. I wanted to be in a school where children didn't go to hotels. I desired to go where children not only didn't own books but didn't even know where the local library was. Sometimes fate deals you a good hand. As I was fretting over my unhappiness at Camelot, I coached the school's math team and it won a district championship. As I proudly left the scene of my team's glory, a principal from a school across town approached me. His team of youngsters had done very poorly that day, and I noticed them walking to their bus with their heads down. This principal had heard about me from my current principal, who had complained about me at administrative meetings; my current leader had said I was a talented young man but "difficult to control." This gentleman from across town asked if I would like to transfer to his school, where the teaching would be tougher. But he promised to stay out of my way. It was an intriguing invitation. In his words, he was inviting me to leave Camelot and come to the Jungle, as he nicknamed his school. The man was shrewd—I have to admit it. He baited the hook and caught me easily. More important, he was totally honest about staying out of my way: the day I began at his school, he retired. I will never forget his wry smile and wink the day he stopped by my classroom to both greet me and say farewell. So the following year I found myself in the Jungle, a school twenty minutes away from Camelot, though it might as well have been twenty light-years. The school was so crowded that students played handball at recess against classroom doors. Over two thousand children attended the school, and all were fed breakfast and lunch there every day. Practically no student tested at grade level. No one spoke English as a first language at home. The test scores were so low that I doubt cheating would have helped much. Trying to replicate what little success I had had at my first school, I planned a weekend trip to the Shakespeare Festival in San Diego. During the orientation meeting for parents and children, there were only a few questions. Parents wanted to know if their children would need passports. Were the children going to be in danger from the INS for leaving Los Angeles? The children wanted to know if there were bathrooms and beds at the hotel. Would there be a telephone to enable them to call home? No one mentioned Hawaii. And so I left the perfect school and perfect situation to go to a place where I have often failed, been hurt, and been downright miserable. It certainly hasn't been a picnic. But I have never regretted avoiding the path of least resistance. At first I didn't know how to negotiate this new course, but in the years to come I would discover many of the ways to stay it. One thing was certain: Robert Frost was a wise man. *Revue de presse* Esquith is a modern-day Thoreau, preaching the value of good work, honest self-reflection and the courage to go one's own way. *Newsday* Half-memoir, half Chicken Soup for the Teachers Soul. . . . Esquith's methods are not complicated, trendy, or political. . . . The perfect spokesman for the pick yourself up by the bootstraps crowd. *The New York Sun* Freethinking, demanding, encouraging. *Kirkus* sPassionate and inspiring...With anecdotes that are alternately amusing and disheartening, Esquith details the joys and frustrations of teaching and offers valuable insights to parents and teachers alike. Booklist