

Greetings!

*This article is part of a series of activities and resources to promote the Center for Youth Citizenship's good citizenship traits of Justice, Fairness, & Equity in schools and communities in 2007-2008. ~ Joseph P. Maloney, Ph. D., Executive Director, Center for Youth Citizenship*



## Making Connections, Making a Difference



Erin Gruwell, inspiration for the recently released film, *Freedom Writers* starring Hilary Swank, talks about her preparation for her first day of teaching high school. As a recent college graduate, Gruwell describes herself in a room filled with students written off by the education system and deemed by some as “unteachable.” Bureaucracies seem to love “new blood”, or in the case of schools, young, new, enthusiastic teachers. By the nature of their age and eagerness, these “newbies” may be better able to relate to and endure their adolescent students. Placing young teachers in tough high school classrooms may be pragmatic and even justified as good personnel practice. Staying young at heart even seems (according to some

teacher gurus) to be helpful to enjoying and surviving an entire teaching career. But energy and enthusiasm may not be enough to reach the goal of a quality education for **all** students in today’s high need schools and communities.

There seems to be a growing number of people searching for meaning and purpose in their everyday work and lives. *Freedom Writers* exemplifies this recent trend and is part of a series of books and screenplays written about individuals who strive to make a change in their own lives which also results in making a difference for others. For many educators, like Gruwell, the reason they prepared and entered the teaching profession was to have an impact on

youth and the future. Erin Gruwell, a teacher dedicated to her students and to motivating and teaching them, had to first break down the barriers to learning, change and inter-group relations.

With some support from within the system, and with the permission and buy-in from her students themselves, Gruwell was able to create an educational environment that valued and promoted diversity. Most importantly, she helped change the lives of her students by encouraging them to question long-held stereotypes, address their deepest struggles, and ultimately recast their futures. Her students went on to become critical thinkers, individuals with initiative and ambitions, and citizens for change – certainly no simple task for a new or experienced teacher or for anyone working with today’s youth!

There are many other sub-points or messages in this story that reinforce the importance of quality teaching and learning. For example, why is it that, all too often, our youngest and newest are placed into the toughest challenges and situations? Is the answer, merely human nature (i.e. pecking order; or an attitude about paying your dues before any benefits or privileges can be claimed from the group)! Entitlement was truly not the issue for Gruwell’s students! Ironically, in the story, these human-nature types of practices were similar in use for the depicted high school staff and the “street gang” members. Young teachers, like Ms. Gruwell, are not fully



prepared for today's teaching realities and responsibilities by their college or middle class backgrounds. Although costly on a personal level, Gruwell was somehow able to more than just survive her first years of teaching. Instead, she managed to bring connections and value to her students. The question of how long new teachers can maintain this level of enthusiasm and commitment is a matter for further discussion and debate.\* Teaching can be a very rewarding career; however, enthusiastic new teachers do often burn out, and many do so without the type of success Gruwell was able to achieve.

The movie's scriptwriters were also correct to convey a concern for labeling students as "unteachable." Lowering achievement or behavior expectations for any population, including students, is an unacceptable starting point. This type of labeling leads to reactive and defensive approaches in over-crowded schools and classrooms as well as in violence-ridden and poverty-stricken communities. It impedes the motivation and potential of the labeled individuals, and also impacts all of us by eroding the principles of equity in opportunity and shared responsibility and accountability. This type of action, that holds some "less able" may be one of the most serious forms of discrimination that exists today.

In addition, *Freedom Writers*, by its very name, is a story about the importance and impact of writing. Literacy skills and instruction are best started at a young age! By the time our students reach high school, it becomes extremely difficult and costly to make up for an inferior elementary school education. Overcoming failure and restarting student interest in writing and learning is fantastic in any form. However, in order to fully prepare students, inspiration and enthusiasm must also be accompanied by the teaching of writing, literacy and communications skills by a well-trained and dedicated professional teacher.

As depicted in the film, learning how to write and communicate also has a lot to do with learning such behaviors as respect, responsibility and independence. Breaking the destructive cycles of illiteracy, poverty and violence will necessitate changing the organizational culture of many of our schools and communities. This type of change is a very difficult job and will take the efforts of many teachers working in partnership with families and other community leaders.

Gruwell's story highlights the potential and success of partnerships as well as the challenges for improved collegiality. Showing mutual respect and appreciation for others, our roles, and unique contributions would make life a whole lot easier for all of us. Generally, we must recognize the wisdom of experience and well-earned expertise but also empower those trying to improve the system and its responsiveness. Adult role-modeling (what we *do* rather than just what we *say*) has been proven to be one of the best forms of teaching and learning. All adults have the responsibility for "walking the talk!"

It is through Gruwell's remarkable story that the **Center for Youth Citizenship (CYC)** has opened a school and community discussion on the importance of **justice, fairness and equity**. In past years, the Center highlighted such stories as Brown vs. Board of Education and the film *Separate but Equal*, and featured Jaime Escalante, educator inspiration for the film *Stand and Deliver*, as well as Coach Ken Carter, inspirational role model and subject of the film *Coach Carter*.

This year, CYC wishes to also emphasize the crucial role that reading and writing skills and good citizenship plays in the lives of students and how literacy skills prepare youth for opportunity and success as future leaders and citizens. If you would like to learn more about CYC's activities and events, please visit

[www.youthcitizenship.org](http://www.youthcitizenship.org), or contact CYC at (916) 228-2322 or [cyc@scoe.net](mailto:cyc@scoe.net).

*\*Please note: The prevalence of these types of situations encountered by new teachers throughout California was undoubtedly the motivation for the introduction of the Beginning Teacher Support and Assistance (BTSA) program in the 1990s.*

***Lowering achievement or behavior expectations for any population, including students, is an unacceptable starting point...***

***...This type of action, that holds some "less able" may be one of the most serious forms of discrimination that exists today.***

*Joseph P. Maloney is the Executive Director of the Center for Youth Citizenship (CYC). CYC believes that it is our duty to prepare and inspire our children to be responsible citizens committed to acting with character. Through Character-Based Citizenship® partnerships, CYC helps schools and communities teach youth the fundamental behaviors, habits, skills and actions that prepare them for academic and community success and full participation in our democracy. Contact Dr. Maloney or CYC at [cyc@scoe.net](mailto:cyc@scoe.net) or (916) 228-2322, or visit [www.youthcitizenship.org](http://www.youthcitizenship.org).*

