

# Los Angeles Times

**BOB SIPCHEN: SCHOOL ME**

**These educators have seen what works**

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I'm haunted by a recurring vision. A limitless throng of yammering teachers, think tankers and ivory tower types descend upon those of us interested in education, burying us in their latest books. Down onto our psyches they thunder, snowboarding atop an avalanche of hardbacks and paperbacks — billions and billions of them — each offering some new solution to schooling's woes. It's impossible to dig out from under education's required reading, let alone to sort the credible thinkers from the crackpots.

That's why I'm massively relieved that when I was asked to moderate a discussion — "Our Schools: What Works?" — at the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books on Saturday, the planners had already selected the panelists. May writing about them here assuage my guilt over all those worthy titles I've neglected in this column.

Let's start with Rafe Esquith, a teacher at Los Angeles' Hobart Boulevard Elementary School, whose "Teach Like Your Hair's On Fire" presents the not-so-incendiary notion that the people standing in front of all those classrooms might have something to do with how well children learn...

At the end of our conversation, Esquith asks who else will be on the panel Saturday. I mention Paul Cummins, the executive director of the New Visions Foundation, a former teacher and the force behind several notoriously progressive schools, including Crossroads in Santa Monica. Esquith erupts in paroxysms of praise.

**In the interim, private and nonprofit groups can fill in some of the gaps, he says. It's no wonder, then, that he gushes when I mention the name of panelist Keren Taylor, whose WriteGirl nonprofit connects high school girls with professional writers and publishes their work in annual anthologies.**

**Public school counselors and English teachers give a nudge toward WriteGirl to the students they think will benefit — most of the 160 now in the program are poor, many are pregnant or mothers, some have real problems. Marshall High senior Deborah Bramwell's middle-class upbringing sounds relatively trouble-free. Yet she, too, seems to treasure her four years in the program.**

I meet Bramwell, 17, as she sits across from screenwriter Tina Van Delden at Hard Times Pizza in Silver Lake.

"I'm not good at social things, so I can be harsh and isolating," Bramwell says, forking meatballs at a sunny outdoor table.

Her smile is sweet and her harsh comments directed solely at herself. Van Delden parries with praise for her protege. I ask if I can hang out while the seasoned writer goes over the prolific young writer's most recent 10 pages.

"I don't think watching someone read is going to be very exciting," Van Delden says. As a screenwriter, she should have known better.

I wish I'd had video cameras recording the scene. The professional writer reads silently and intently, lips rising into faint smiles and drooping into empathetic frowns, pen circling words as she edges through the emotions and observations of an illiterate young character named Roger, who is remembering a scene from third grade.

Bramwell watches even more intently, her face a riveting display of adolescent and writerly hope, pride, insecurity, anticipation. Roger is an amusing, complex character, who lives with a Harley-riding mom and battles twins named Yale and Harvard. The writing is nuanced and polished.

Here's a passage chosen only because it helps me wrap up this column:

"I loved how the teacher said my name. She said it like I was the first and only Roger she had ever met, or the first and only me at least. It was never assuming or demanding. She never told me what to do, but asked gently. She treated all the students this way, because they respected her for this kindness."

I know Van Delden agrees with me when I say that her young peer writes like blue blazes. I'm pretty sure Esquith and Cummins would agree when I say the girl's snippet of adolescent prose leads in a couple of ways to the tricky root of the question, "What works?"

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To discuss this column or the question, "What's the best education writing you've read," visit [latimes.com/schoolme](http://latimes.com/schoolme). Bob Sipchen can be reached at [bob.sipchen@latimes.com](mailto:bob.sipchen@latimes.com).