What Hollywood Can Teach Our Schools

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Peters grew up in Washington, D.C., and attended St. John's College in Annapolis before earning his B.A. from the University of Iowa in 1987. Prior to becoming a teacher, he spent five years in Los Angeles attempting to launch a major filmmaking career. During this time, while discovering that he had absolutely no knack for sustaining suspense in the second act of a screenplay, he realized that he did have the ability to connect with and encourage young people. Hence, in 1994, he got a life and proudly earned his California Teaching Credential at California State University, Dominguez Hills.
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by

Christian Peters

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Tyler and Me

Tyler is an eighth-grader in San Bernardino, California. He is a tall, outgoing kid with a gregarious bluster that overlays a thoughtful, inquisitive, sometimes brooding interior. Academically, Tyler possesses slightly above average vocabulary and writing skills, average math computation and problem-solving skills, and slightly below average study skills. He earns mostly C’s and B’s in a school district that places in the bottom quartile of California schools in standardized test scores. Tyler’s individual test scores place him squarely in the middle range of achievement for all California eighth-graders. In other words, while Tyler’s solid math and reading skills put him on track to attend a four-year college, his erratic motivation and study skills—as well as the low achievement and expectations of the students and teachers around him—are pushing him just as firmly away from college.

Tyler is not a “special needs” student. He is not learning or physically handicapped. Nor is he “gifted and talented.” He is not an “English language learner.” He is not “at-risk” because of exceptionally poor attendance or behavior. He does not merit any of the desig-
nations that would, by federal mandate, compel his schools to offer him special programs and support services. Rather, he is like the majority of American secondary school students, an average or "standard" student. He is the type of student whom the vast bulk of our school system is geared to serve in a generic, one-size-fits-all manner.

However, Tyler is a special needs student. Every student needs to be treated as having special needs, not as a standardized commodity. And the best systemic model available to schools as a guide in making this transition is the Hollywood movie industry.

I am one of Tyler's teachers. I had been teaching middle school in San Bernardino for five years (I now am teaching high school) and I have developed a particular interest in working with students such as Tyler. These students have reached the secondary level with a good base of skills. But their lack of motivation, poor environment, and inconsistent approach to learning puts them at risk in high school.

**Hollywood: Jay, Mike, Ed, and Me**

Before becoming a teacher, I was an aspiring screenwriter living in Los Angeles and circulating through the hustling, scuffling fringes of the entertainment industry. During those Hollywood wannabe days, there were three people who, in retrospect, embody for me the creative, optimistic, resourceful best of the entertainment business. Far from being the hot-shot, Tarentino-esque prodigies I most envied at the time, they were Jay, Mike,
and Ed, my co-workers in the wire-service room at the Investor's Business Daily newspaper where I supported my screenwriting habit.

They were, like me, aspiring something-or-others in their twenties: Jay from Pennsylvania, Mike from England, and Ed from Michigan. They were a few of the thousands of young people from all over the world who populate Los Angeles' west side, toiling in restaurants, video stores, back offices, and telemarketing boiler rooms while pursuing their writing, acting, directing, and producing dreams in their spare time.

What was truly wonderful about Jay, Mike, and Ed was the way they brought that otherwise achingly dull workplace to life. Virtually every morning, one of them would come barreling into the office, nearly exploding with the story idea, sitcom character, cartoon, or song he'd stayed up late the night before composing. Not only were they eager to share their ideas; when they didn't have any of their own, they would relentlessly pester me to share pages from whatever screenplay I was working on. They were forever on the lookout for an opportunity to collaborate or form a partnership. Indeed, one of the things that made me realize that I wasn't cut out for the movie business was seeing how much more aggressively these guys hustled than I was willing to.

The Teaching Assembly Line

Now, five years later, despite my being engaged in a more satisfying profession with more nobly intentioned
colleagues, I find myself missing Jay, Mike, and Ed. Not that there aren’t teachers as creative and dynamic as they were. It’s just that I have a hard time finding anyone who is eager to share new ideas or seek any kind of feedback whatsoever on his or her work.

I have plenty of friends among my current coworkers. I know and chat easily with all of them and socialize with many of them. But I have hardly a clue to what they do in their classrooms, what they are accomplishing or not accomplishing, or what I could learn from any of them.

The organization of secondary school curriculum and the school day still is a compartmentalized, factory-like, industrial-age artifact. And like an assembly line worker, I spend my days entirely isolated in my little assembly bay (classroom) absorbed in slamming rivets of knowledge into the literally hundreds of kids who sail by me at 45-minute intervals. I have little time to think or involve myself with anything else or — even worse than an assembly line — any way of assessing or finding out if my rivets have held in place.

In public education, there is little time and even less incentive for teachers to exchange ideas, critique, and push each other as show business aspirants perpetually do in Hollywood. Indeed, for many teachers, it’s considered almost a faux pas to inquire too much into what they actually do in their classrooms or to ask to observe one of them, an intrusion on the order of asking about their religion or their sex life. Teaching’s dirty secret, I am convinced, is that all of us teachers are intensely insecure and uncertain of just what the hell it is we are
supposed to be doing in those classrooms. At worst, we suspect that everybody except us knows what we are supposed to be doing.

Hollywood Changed, But Schools Stayed the Same

There are striking parallels in the way both the movie industry and the comprehensive secondary school developed. Both evolved during roughly the same period of time. Both were the result of radically changed social and economic conditions brought on by rapid urbanization and industrialization during the last half of the 19th century. Both were designed when the efficiency-oriented, mass-production model was considered state of the art.

As the 1940s came to an end, the six studios that dominated movie making were structured along a highly centralized, top-down, factory model, much as the vast majority of school districts are today. But the Paramount antitrust decision of 1949, as well as the advent of television and the increased bargaining power of big stars and independent producers, forced the studios to drastically alter their way of doing business in order to survive.

The studios stopped doing the things they could no longer do effectively, that is, controlling talent and the creative process. Instead, they focused on what they still could do and that no one else could do: provide independent producers with cash and access to the vast technical and distribution infrastructure that they still
commanded. Thus a new system evolved in which independent production companies (run by creative risk-takers) contract with studios to produce a given number of films over a given period of time. They are given a budget, office space on studio lots, and almost total creative freedom in return for generating hit movies and TV series. If they do, they get renewed. If they don’t, they’re homeless. Simple.

Now whether or not this structure is a good formula for artistic success, or even for the mental health of its participants, is open to debate. What is not open to debate is its monumental economic success. During the past 25 years — often referred to as the “Blockbuster Era” — the profits of all but one of the Big Seven studios have grown at a greater rate than during any equivalent period in history. Creatively as well, there has been an explosion of technical innovation and thematic breadth far surpassing that which occurred during the previous 40 years of the industry’s evolution. But most important for our purposes, it is a system that draws increasing numbers of bright, ambitious Jays, Mikes, and Eds to L.A., people who are willing to work extremely hard — despite the slim odds of success and near-certain prospect of poverty and repeated rejection — in the hope of eventually landing a big studio development deal.

The modern secondary school emerged fairly recently during a remarkable period of national consensus on education between 1895 and 1925. There was widespread public alarm over the growth of the seemingly under-
educated, uncivilized, largely immigrant, urban proletariat. Some system, it was thought, was desperately needed to integrate these lumpen masses into the mainstream of American life, socially, intellectually, and morally.

The majority of our secondary school institutions came into being during this time. The Carnegie Unit became the staple measure of academic progress. The 45-minute schedule became the universal structure for the school day. Departmental organization divided the school into fiefdoms. Math, science, English, and history were codified as the “core” areas of study. Finally, the multiple-choice, machine-graded, standardized test was instituted as the preeminent measure of academic achievement.

If we were to take typical movie-goers in 1930 and transport them to a movie theater 35 years later, in 1965, they would be unlikely to note, aside from the addition of color film and location shooting, any great stylistic or thematic shift in the movies they were watching. Similarly, if the typical high school students of 1930 were transported to a typical high school of 2000, they would experience virtually no variation in the content or structure of their day, aside from an occasional run-in with a computer or TV and VCR. Of how many other venues of American life could this be accurately said? Few, if any. The difference between the movie industry and the schools is that the movie industry recognized its obsolescence a generation earlier.

Today the nation’s school system is at the same place the studio system was at 40 years ago. It is stuck in an
industrial-age organizational structure that is widely perceived as no longer getting the job done. The only difference is that while the old studio system collapsed because it could no longer control its creative means of production, in the case of the school system, the problem is the ambiguity of the product itself.

The main difference between schools now and schools 30 years ago is that now they are expected to educate a much larger and more diverse population of students while, at the same time, addressing the particular needs of an ever-increasing number of special groups. In addition, as the strength of family structures, as well as most other formal social structures, have steadily eroded since the early Sixties, high school has gone from playing the limited function of preparing young people to become more well-rounded citizens to being the center of much of the typical adolescent's identity. While the standardized, centralized, assembly line approach to education worked fairly effectively in a more limited role for the better part of the century, it is now entirely obsolete.
Starting a
Production Company

In my fifth year of teaching, two other teachers and I attempted to develop our own "production company" to focus on the needs of "kids in the middle" like Tyler. We proposed to our principal the creation of an interdisciplinary team — sort of a school within a school — that would consist of three classes and would be built around a nationally well-regarded curriculum called AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), which is specifically aimed at the type of students we wanted in the team. We asked that we be allowed to select 100 students that fit the AVID profile and that we be allowed to schedule them so that each teacher would have each student for a full two-period block, rather than the usual 45-minute class period.

In return for this unusual autonomy, we would commit to raising students' standardized test scores, assigning them more challenging work, and holding them to a higher standard of organization and self-discipline than they would have in regular classes. The successes we achieved, as well as the obstacles we encountered,
illustrate both what is possible in schools and what is intrinsically wrong with them.

**Successes and Obstacles**

Our principal immediately liked the idea of teachers voluntarily stepping forward and making a commitment to both improve test scores and adopt a demanding, high-profile program such as AVID; and she allowed us to form the team.

However, most administrators are considerably nervous about singling out particular groups of students for special attention, unless such singling out is mandated by law. They do not want to be accused of discrimination or "tracking" (singling out one group of students as more potentially successful and therefore more worthy of special attention). Therefore, our principal was willing to give us only one AVID class concealed among two other standard classes.

As the year progressed with the AVID class, it soon was apparent that we had much more motivational leverage with Tyler than we did with kids in the regular classes. The fact that his needs were more or less the same as those of his classmates made it much easier to set challenging, meaningful goals for him (writing 10 complete sets of notes — with summaries — each week; writing well-structured, five-paragraph essays; explaining mathematical formulas in writing, etc.). This is much more difficult to do in regular classes where there is likely to be one group of students capable of working above grade level and another group working
as many as four grades below level, which tends to dilute the intensity of all class activities.

Initially, we wanted to do detailed assessments of each student’s ability levels in several key skill areas. However, we quickly realized that we had no idea how to do this, nor did anyone else we knew. Secondary teachers are primarily expected to organize and deliver standardized curricula in a particular content area. We are neither trained nor expected to assess the progress of students in developing the learning skills necessary to achieve this mastery.

By working together in developing common goals for similar kids, the teachers on our team all became better, simply by virtue of having to pay more attention to what the others were doing or not doing. We had to communicate more about projects, individual students’ progress, motivation, and discipline. In other words, we talked together about Tyler and learned more about his entire experience at school beyond our individual classrooms. In doing so, we were forced to notice when one of us was having success with Tyler and the others were not. In turn, this led us to reexamine our approach to teaching him.

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to get other teachers excited about working on a team such as ours or to view it as anything other than “extra” work. Most view the essential work of teaching as entirely solitary: planning lessons, instructing, and grading in a single content area. Indeed, those are the only things for which teachers are truly held accountable, the work they can most easily do alone. Achieving demonstrable student
progress, which is best done in collaboration with other teachers across all subject areas, is an afterthought.

Perhaps most important of all, by blocking the classes into two periods a day per teacher and having each teacher see 90 to 100 students per day instead of the usual 180 to 200, we all knew Tyler better: his strengths and weaknesses, his specific concerns, and his personality quirks. Adolescents respond best when their teachers know them well and care about them individually. They are least motivated when they feel anonymous and irrelevant. There is no question that Tyler worked harder during this year than at any time in his academic career because he knew we were paying more attention to him.

However, blocking the schedule into double periods so that teachers have fewer students overall means that each teacher must teach more than one subject, for example, math and science, English and social studies, etc. Our AVID team was disbanded after one year, not because we failed to achieve our goals with the kids, but because our math/science teacher had to resign due to illness. Although we certainly could have found a teacher willing to take her place, we could not find one with her unusual credential combination of math and science.

What is most disturbing about the four obstacles we faced is that, in each case, a bureaucratic agenda served to push caring, motivated teachers away from Tyler. The fear of the appearance of discrimination, the focus on standardization instead of the individual needs of students, the emphasis on process instead of results, and the preoccupation with teacher's paper credentials over
their proven desire and ability to teach all work against
students like Tyler. Next year, Tyler likely will be at-
tending the standard high school college prep classes.
He will have at least five different teachers. He will share
classrooms with about a hundred other students of
widely different skill levels. If he fails or if he succeeds,
no one will particularly notice. And the system is quite
comfortable with that.
Successful Production Companies

Across the nation, there are numerous examples of individual schools, or schools-within-schools, that have succeeded by defining specific goals for their students and by establishing their own unique curricula and environments. In other words, these are schools that have effectively transformed themselves into independent production companies. The following are some of the better-known examples.

*Central Park East School, New York.* An exemplar of the "Essential Schools" philosophy, CPES eschews traditional subject areas, class periods, and school activities in favor of an intensive emphasis on cross-disciplinary inquiry, analysis, and presentation. Assessment is based primarily on student "exhibitions," in which they demonstrate overall mastery of a content area through a variety of media and modes of expression. Codified bodies of knowledge are de-emphasized. Developing students' ability to think, learn, and communicate well is put first. The school also places a high value on strong relationships between teachers and students in the be-
lief that “all students must be known.” Class sizes are rigorously maintained at 25 or less. All students are placed in “advisory groups” of about the same size, where one teacher is responsible for helping students to tie together their entire school experience.

*KIPP Academy, Houston.* KIPP stresses academic rigor. KIPP has both extended hours and summer classes. Students are required to be at school a full nine hours per day, four days per week during the summer, and every Saturday morning. Students are literally surrounded by the message that only the highest levels of achievement, capped by acceptance into a four-year college, constitute acceptable goals. Clear and demanding academic goals are set for all students, and all students are expected to take responsibility for each other’s success. This relentless drive is balanced by large doses of *esprit de corps* and acknowledgment of student effort, including frequent awards assemblies. KIPP also organizes regular school trips — and not just the typical trips to the zoo — but flights to Washington, D.C., camping retreats, and river rafting expeditions, all designed to bond the school community together with a sense of common mission.

*Durham Arts Academy, Durham, N.C.* This school uses block scheduling to allow students to focus a substantial portion of each day studying the visual and performing arts. However, Durham differs in one important aspect from most other performing arts magnets: It does not require student auditions as a prerequisite for admission. Rather, Durham bases its approach on the assumption that, if students are coming to the school for the
express purpose of developing particular skills and talents, this will provide the motivation that powers success in its academic programs as well. It is assumed that the school's frequent student exhibitions, recitals, and theatrical productions will act as an additional magnet for increased parent involvement and support.

_Foshay Learning Center, Los Angeles._ Located in south central Los Angeles, Foshay attempts to become a true community center for its students and their parents. The school's doors are open from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. every weekday. Parents are required to participate either in planning and policy making or in volunteer support roles. More than 100 special classes and programs are offered at the school and open to all members of the community. Like CPES, Foshay eschews more expensive traditional programs that serve relatively few students, such as organized sports, in favor of more and smaller classes designed to foster a familial closeness between staff and students.

_H.D. Woodlawn High School, Arlington, Va._ A throwback to the counter-culture, "open school," reform philosophy that flourished during the late Sixties and early Seventies, Woodlawn has a minimum of rules and restrictions and lots of democratic student input into the running of the school and the selection of their classes. Schoolwide "town meetings" are held each week in which school rules and policies are constantly debated and amended by the entire student-staff community. There are no fixed bell schedules. Students sit and eat wherever and whenever they please. Teachers are addressed by their first names.
Rio Rancho High School, Rio Rancho, N.M. Rio Rancho emphasizes career development. At the end of their freshman year, students are required to choose from one of five academies: humanities, science, fine arts, business, or technology. Almost every class they take will be connected to possible jobs and careers in the areas they have selected. The assumption is that if students are required to make a personal commitment to the goals and curriculum of their academic program, they will inevitably invest more effort in that program. It is also Rio Rancho's purpose to attract more local business investment in the academies by giving a more specific, real-world focus to its programs.

At first glance these schools have little in common. Certainly the typical reader of the above synopsis will find some that will make them want to stand up and cheer and others that will make them recoil in horror. Indeed, they run the full gamut from the rigorous, back to basics conservatism of KIPP to the classic, laid-back liberalism of Woodlawn, from the holistic intimacy of CPES and Foshay to the unabashed vocationalism of Durham Arts and Rio Rancho. However, despite their disparate pedagogies, they all share two essential characteristics of the school as an independent production company.

First, admission to each of these schools is in no way predetermined or "screened." Students do not (with the exception of Rio Rancho, which is its district's only high school) automatically "feed" into them because of their geographic location. Nor do any of these schools subject
prospective students to any sort of admissions standards that would allow the school to pick only the best, brightest, and most gifted students, as do private schools and many "elite" magnet schools. Rather, students at all of these schools are admitted by blind lottery.

Second, each of these schools was freed to develop its own curricula, standards, procedures, and schedules with little or no interference from the state or district central offices. Administrators, teachers, students, and parents are involved with these schools either because they had a hand in their creation or because they freely chose to buy into their philosophies. At these schools, adolescents have what adolescents need most. They have an identity. They have clearly defined, achievable standards. They are stakeholders in the school because they choose to be there.

In every case except the Durham Arts Academy, these schools were created not by their governing bodies but through the extraordinary initiative and tenacity of individual educators and community members. These individuals experienced at least as much resistance as they did support from their school districts in their attempts to create programs with a unique flavor.

While it is true that most large school districts, bowing to growing pressure and competition from private schools and voucher initiatives on state ballots, have created space for "alternative," "magnet," and "charter" schools, such schools persistently have been relegated (as their designation as "alternative" suggests) to fringe status. They are not established as places where most students, or average students — students like Tyler — could attend.
Why should not all schools be alternative schools? Why shouldn’t every school not only be allowed to forge its own identity, curriculum, and style — as long as it is willing to serve all students — but be expected to do so? Conversely, why shouldn’t every school be expected to demonstrate exactly how and to what extent students are better off for having been at that school?

That, in fact, is how Hollywood works so well. In the movie industry, everyone who wants studio backing for a film must convince the studio of the unique and irresistible qualities that will make their film a hit. What is more, they will be expected to offer some sort of track record indicating that they can make that successful film happen on time and on budget.
How Schools Can Go Hollywood

Like the studios in the Fifties and Sixties, school districts and state education bureaucracies need to stop trying to do what they can no longer do well — mandate educational strategies for addressing an impossible diversity of educational needs — and focus on what they can do well: allocate resources and monitor and reward achievement, thereby freeing the front-line educators to stop worrying about such process and compliance issues as teacher credentials and state-approved curricula, and start worrying about proving that their kids are demonstrably benefiting from whatever it is they are doing.

Consider again our little experiment last year in San Bernardino. In the final analysis, I have no idea whether we were successful in terms of our impact on Tyler — nor was the school district interested. We were evaluated, as are most public school teachers, by four, largely irrelevant criteria:

- Did we have the appropriate content area credentials?
• Were we delivering the state- and district-approved curricula?
• Were we getting our paperwork completed accurately and on time?
• Were there any complaints about us from parents or students?

The ultimate value implied by these criteria is that things that happen in schools — like a factory — should be as predictable as possible and the machinery should be kept moving as smoothly and continuously as possible.

During the studio era in Hollywood, the value structure was similar. Because the public’s entertainment options were more limited and the studios control of distribution and talent complete, the particular merits or achievements of any one picture were not so important. Of far more importance was maintaining a consistent and fairly predictable flow of product and thereby ensuring long-term cash flow. In Hollywood today, evaluating producers based entirely on the quantity, efficiency, and consistency of their output with little regard for performance of individual films would be (and nearly was) financial suicide for the studios. In today’s Hollywood, everything revolves around “hits” — that is, the demonstrated success of each individual production. Today, producers, directors, and actors rise and fall with each new project.

Schools can and should develop an incentive structure like that of the movie industry, which emphasizes demonstrable success, rather than predictability and standardization. It should be one that inherently pushes
people with similar interests and complementary talents toward one another and that encourages them to stop at nothing in the pursuit of real learning for their students. Above all, we need to ask what will motivate teachers to go beyond delivering a standard curriculum and to create a unique and personalized learning experience for each student.

Incentives are a very tricky issue in education. State houses and school boards across the nation are wrestling with ways to “hold schools accountable.” The most difficult problem is creating a formula for tying a system of rewards and sanctions to the demonstrated performance of students, usually on a standardized test. On one side there is the growing number of politicians who insist that teachers and schools must be held accountable for the results they achieve. On the other side are the teacher unions, which stubbornly insist that holding teachers accountable for student performance is patently unfair because student performance is heavily influenced by cultural and socioeconomic factors beyond teachers’ control.

The arguments of both sides slightly miss the point. For example, most state governments have shown a strong inclination to assess schools’ and teachers’ performance solely on the basis of students’ scores on standardized tests. Teachers are absolutely right to insist that there is much more to good learning and teaching than can be revealed by that one narrow measure. On the other hand, the politicians are absolutely correct to insist that education desperately needs to adopt the Hollywood concept that people who are involved in
producing "hits" should be rewarded somehow and that those that do not should be sanctioned somehow. Unfortunately, despite all of the rhetoric over the past decade about accountability, there are still just two states that have developed comprehensive systems for rewarding successful schools and sanctioning low-performing ones, Texas and North Carolina. Not coincidentally, it is these two states that showed the greatest overall improvement, across demographic categories, in students' standardized test scores between 1990 and 1996, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

As more state legislatures try to measure the success of their schools, most rely entirely on annual standardized test scores. Many educators will, with merit, argue that standardized test scores alone measure far too narrow a slice of what good schools actually do. Further, with less justification, they argue that it is just plain wrong to rate schools in comparison with one another at all, that separate schools are too individual and special to be subjected to such a crude rating system. This assumption is simply wrong.

I agree that every school is unique; but so is every movie, every business venture, and every ball club. Yet in those fields we don't excuse the individual ventures from judgment merely because of their unique nature. The question should not be whether to rate the players, but to rate them in a way that truly and comprehensively measures real quality.

A hit movie, contrary to common perception, is deemed so by the studio backing it based on not just
one, but at least eight separate measures: its critical success, its overall box office, its opening box office, its "word of mouth" box office, its box office among specific demographic groups, the ratio of its total box office to advertising expenditure, whether it was completed on time, and whether it was completed under budget—all of which taken together provide the basis for the studio's overall evaluation of the film's success.

Similarly, the success of a secondary school can, I believe, be broken into nine separate objective measures, all of which can be made to allow for demographic disparities and various categories of students within individual schools (that is, gifted students, minority students, learning handicapped students, low-income students, etc.):

1. **Standardized test scores**: While these should not be the sole measure of a school's success (as many states are now making them), they are a good measure of students' reading comprehension, grammar, and computation skills and should be valued as such, no more, no less.

2. **A.P. or I.B. test-taking rates**: This particular measure was developed by *Washington Post* education writer Jay Mathews as a strong measure of a school's overall academic rigor or upward push. The number of Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate tests taken at a particular school in a given year is divided by the number of graduating seniors that same year.

3. **Percent of students accepted to four-year colleges**: Another strong measure of upward push, as well as students' individual initiative.
4. **Student absenteeism**: A good measure of the overall learning environment created by the school. If school is a stimulating, rewarding, and safe place, kids will show up more often.

5. **Teacher turnover**: A good measure of the overall professional environment. If teachers feel effective, supported, and appreciated at a school, they won’t leave.

6. **Average hours of extra duty per teacher**: Teachers who coach teams, direct plays or bands, advise clubs, or tutor after school tend to be the most enthusiastic, caring, and committed, as well as the ones with whom students make the strongest connections. The more of them a school has, the better the school.

7. **Parent involvement**: The more parents are seen and heard around the school — whether having conferences with teachers, volunteering as tutors, fund raising, serving as chaperones, or just attending plays, recitals, or athletic events — the more students, teachers, and administrators are kept on their toes.

8. **Average hours of extracurricular activity per student**: Just like teachers, students who involve themselves in school beyond their required classes generally perform better academically, are more goal oriented, and are, in general, happier at school.

9. **Disciplinary incidents per student**: The more students enjoy being in school and feel a connection to the school and a stake in the school’s reputation, the fewer incidences of fighting, vandalism, tardiness, and harassment there will be.

The better schools perform according to these criteria (again, and this is extremely important, adjusting for
their demographic profiles) the more they should be rewarded. That is, the more materials, more technology, more grants, and more recognition should flow to them. Conversely, schools that perform poorly by these indices should be allowed to wither and die as the successful schools expand or spin off to take in their students. This is the way that everything that is growing and dynamic in our society (including the movies) works. Why not the schools?

Unfortunately, this is where teachers unions get in the way. Let me caution that this is in no way an anti-union diatribe; there is no question that the only reason teachers today are able to enjoy solid, middle-class incomes is the activism of unions over the past 30 years. The problem with the unions is not their activism, but their insistence on continuing to follow an industrial collective bargaining approach that defines teachers as interchangeable factory labor. Because of this, they will utterly reject the notion of any kind of performance incentives for teachers. This is primarily because such notions traditionally have been viewed by the labor movement as a subtle divide-and-conquer strategy on the part of management. The unions also argue that teachers are not motivated by such rewards, that teachers are so intrinsically virtuous that they always do their utmost in pursuit of the highest possible levels of achievement for their students, regardless of their compensation. As a teacher, I can confidently assert that this is not true.

Teachers unions could take a lesson from the Hollywood writers, actors, and directors guilds. Rather than
pretend that all of their members are identical cogs in the machinery of entertainment, Hollywood collective bargaining agreements attempt to place a solid floor beneath the industry’s pay and incentive structure that prevents the least powerful and successful members from being taken advantage of or abused, while the most powerful and successful still are permitted to reap the fruits of their achievements.

Of course, this begs the question of what sort of incentives will motivate teachers to extend themselves? Hollywood, of course, as well as most other major industries, offers big bucks as part of its incentive packages. However, schools never will be able to offer big bucks. The most lucrative merit pay proposals are potential bonuses amounting to, at most, $5,000 per year. It is insulting to suggest that the immense passion, imagination, and persistence required to teach well can be coaxed out of a teacher for a few hundred extra bucks a month.

But once again, the Hollywood comparison might just point the way. Let’s go back to Jay, Mike, and Ed. Did they come to L.A. primarily to get rich? Certainly they fantasized about it — a lot (so did I). But remember, their chances of actually getting rich in Hollywood were virtually nil. Yet still they came and worked and worked and worked for years. If nailing down six-figure or higher incomes had really been their number-one goal, there are numerous paths that bright, hard-working, young people with college degrees could pursue that would offer far superior odds of success. Instead, what they came for was something that only Hollywood
could offer: the opportunity to bring immense human and technological resources together to create works that would be truly and undeniably their own. I can really think of only one other career that can come close to offering this type of reward: teaching.

Teachers have their own cast and crew placed at their disposal each day. When they realize their unique vision, they can see it immediately in the kids’ expressions and hear it in their voices. And if it really works, the students also take ownership of it and it becomes their unique vision, an element of their character, which is exactly the magic of Hollywood.

The most important incentive that teachers can be offered is increased freedom to be the authors of their own production, to be given the freedom to write or select their own curriculum, choose their own setting, pick the partners with whom they can accomplish the most, pick the kids they can best serve — all on the sole condition that they can prove that the student is better off now than he was before he met them.
Classic Movies, Classic Schools

The most important thing that Hollywood and our schools have in common is that they are both built around creative enterprises. Their success is based on a kind of alchemy that can never be reduced to an exact formula. Great teachers, like great directors, are able to take an idea, combine it with the right group of people and resources, and make a unique world that engages, inspires, and makes a lasting impact on those who come into contact with it.

During the Fifties and Sixties, the movie industry laid the foundation for a system that would encourage such visionary talents as Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Martin Scorsese, and James Cameron. Schools should be laying the groundwork for the same sort of explosion of talent and innovation to occur in education in the 21st century. What seminal films such as Bonnie & Clyde, M.A.S.H., The Godfather, and Star Wars were to the film industry several decades ago, such ground breaking schools as Central Park East, Foshay, KIPP, Durham Arts, and H.D. Woodlawn should be to education now; the instigators of massive, systemic change.
Just as there was writing on the wall for the studios during the Fifties in the form of competition from television, increasingly powerful talent agents, and antitrust court decisions, so it is at the turn of the century for public schools in the form of the growing number and success of charter schools and voucher initiatives, ever-increasing private school enrollments, and even the dramatic growth of home schooling. The studios realized that the system was changing with or without them and that, if they wanted to continue to be players, they would have to drastically alter the way they did business. Similarly, both school bureaucrats and teachers unions must realize that the Progressive-era education system in this country is fast fading from relevance and will eventually disappear, as surely as did the old Hollywood studio system. Education must change just as Hollywood did.

The next several decades could be made an incubator for an exponential growth of creativity and innovation similar to that which the movie industry experienced over the past 30 years. Eventually our schools could evolve into places where each student can find a place, a program, a philosophy, and a community that perfectly fits his or her individual needs. Or they could become an even worse example of the dark side of capitalism, where only the needs of the privileged few are met, and the rest of our youth are consigned to an aimless, institutionalized purgatory. We are at a crossroads.
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Bessie F. Gabbard Initiative on Leadership

The Bessie F. Gabbard Initiative on Leadership in Education for the 21st Century, dubbed the 2000-2001 Celebration for short, reaffirms the central importance of the Phi Delta Kappa tenet of leadership. Bessie F. Gabbard (1905-2001), the "First Lady" of PDK and a member and longtime chair of the board of governors of the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, provided the impetus for this initiative, which will focus the energies of PDK members and staff during the two years of transition to the new millennium. During this 2000-2001 Celebration, special attention will be paid to leaders and leadership in education with a particular focus on PDK's traditional advocacy on behalf of the public schools.