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Knowledge Is Power

Michael Feinberg and David Levin achieve success in tough circumstances.

By Martin A. Davis, Jr.

The story of Michael Feinberg and David Levin has reached near-mythic proportions in education circles. Two young Ivy League grads who joined Teach for America and initially floundered as teachers mixed rigor with ritual to produce a model for learning that became the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP)—arguably the most successful, and surely the most famous, charter school brand in the country.

And while careful study played an important role in launching the duo from Penn and Yale into the rarefied air of celebrity educators, so, too, did their relative innocence. “Knowledge is power,” Feinberg says, “but ignorance is bliss.”

Their odyssey began in Houston in 1993, where Feinberg and Levin took elementary school teaching positions as members of Teach for America. When they realized they could barely control their classrooms, much less teach students a great deal, they began looking for

solutions. They turned to Harriet Ball, a teacher in Levin’s school who used chants, rhymes, and games to keep order and impart knowledge, and whose success was plain to see. The two novice teachers spent hours with Ball, dissecting her approach and bringing it into their classrooms. They saw immediate results—and got immediate push-back from the administration.

Despite being named teacher of the year by his colleagues, Levin’s principal fired him for refusing to exempt kids in his classroom from standardized tests, a common practice in schools looking to boost their achievement on paper. Never mind that Levin’s pupils did well. The

principal was unmoved. “Even though the kids passed the test, it was viewed as insubordination,” Levin says. Lesser people might have said the heck with it and gone on to other lines of work. Not Levin. He was sure he could fight through it to create something better. “Being naïve helped,” he said. “Not knowing how difficult it was going to be helped, too.”

Feinberg didn’t fare much better. He wanted to start a small Knowledge Is Power Program in his school, but he couldn’t get the Houston Independent School District to grant him classroom space. In fact, he couldn’t even get the district to hear his case. Fein-



Michael Feinberg, co-founder of KIPP



David Levin, co-founder of KIPP

berg repeatedly sought an appointment with then-superintendent Rod Paige, only to be rebuffed by gatekeepers. So he sat on the hood of Paige's car one afternoon until Paige left the office to drive home. He granted Feinberg a meeting—and the space he needed.

"I was too young, too naive, and too mission-driven not to think that sitting on Paige's car was anything but the right thing to do," says Feinberg.

When all else failed, "mission" kept the two pioneers going. They were figuring out how to get poor inner-city kids to achieve at high levels. Their mission was to ensure that this emerging solution wasn't snuffed out by bureaucrats who refused to alter standard operating procedures to accommodate models that, though unorthodox, worked.

Struggling Against Mediocrity

Despite innumerable frustrating run-ins, today the two don't expend much energy slamming their early adversaries. "We are in a struggle against mediocrity, apathy, low expectations," says Levin, "but we're not in a struggle with the public school system." The basketball-loving teachers use a sports analogy to explain, and endure, the education establishment's

opposition to their ideas. Policymakers and administrators, they say, are to teachers what sports writers are to athletes. They "can understand education as well [as teachers]," says Feinberg, much as sports writers can be knowledgeable about the contests they cover. But to understand "the day-to-day experience of doing teaching well, day in and day out, in a difficult environment," he continues, talk to the person in front of the kids. That's who is going to execute the ideas.

The Joy Factor

Through it all, they say, it's the Joy Factor ("J-Factor") that makes things work. The kids love what they're doing in school,

so KIPP's long days (up to nine and a half hours) don't seem too burdensome. And the teachers are dedicated beyond belief. The kids ask much of them: teachers are essentially "on-call" day and night and students don't hesitate to call their cell phones when struggling with homework

"We are in a struggle against mediocrity, apathy, low expectations, but we're not in a struggle with the public school system."

assignments or personal issues. But they also give much back, particularly respect. Feinberg says their goal is to have "eighteen-year-olds showing up on campus seeing teaching as being as sexy a profession as stockbroker or doctor." Says Levin of the KIPP faculty: "Our work is a testament to the countless number of teachers and the quality of their work."

And what a testament it is. Seventy-nine percent of KIPP graduates are in higher education. In San Antonio, KIPP Aspire Academy's seventh-graders lead the district in reading and math scores. In

rural Gaston, North Carolina, 100 percent of eighth-graders achieved above grade level scores in all their tests. KIPP KEY Academy in Washington, D.C., and KIPP Academy New York in the Bronx are the highest achieving middle schools in their respective districts.

Such results are not anomalous. They represent the high achievement levels reached in almost every KIPP school (now fifty-two, including those slated to open in 2006) across the nation.

Levin is still a practicing principal at his KIPP school in the Bronx, while Feinberg is working to develop additional school models (high school, pre-school, etc.) from his base in Houston. "Levin," says Feinberg, "is still the most talented teacher that I know." KIPP's main offices are in San Francisco. Jokes Feinberg, "We divide up the country. Dave gets Manhattan and the Bronx, and I get the rest."

Despite their success, the two haven't quit striving. KIPP hopes to have 100 schools in operation within the next five years. This will happen in large part because of strong support from Don and Doris Fisher, co-founders of The Gap and philanthropists dedicated to expanding high-quality education opportunities for inner-city children. Through their foundation, the Fishers have been supporting KIPP schools almost from the beginning. Moreover, Levin is working to launch an organization that will credential KIPP teachers. "Getting permission to credential your own teachers is important," he says. Important, but not easy. But that hasn't stopped Feinberg and Levin yet.

There's a lot of joy in these men's lives. Still in their thirties, they retain the passion that launched them and made KIPP the best-known school model in America. Here's hoping they never lose their youthful, and helpful, naiveté. ■



Martin A. Davis, Jr. is Senior Writer and Editor for the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. A former adjunct professor of medieval history at the University of South Carolina, he made the jump to journalism in 2000.

Can China teach us a math lesson?

Students in China are taught math better than students in the United States, says a new Asia Society study. Ahn Do, of the *Orange County Register*, writes that according to the report, average math scores for students “trail significantly behind nearly all countries in the Asia Pacific region.”

“I’m not surprised,” she quotes Jimmy Ma, chairman of the South Coast Chinese Cultural Association in Irvine, California. He and fellow board member Stephen Zhou were taught to memorize multiplication tables in first grade, an exercise which Zhou recalls “as basic as singing a song.”

They soon started doing complex addition, subtraction, and division, as well as multiplication, in their heads—routines repeated by kids in Taiwan and China today, explains Ma, who immigrated to California to pursue an electrical engineering degree at Cal Poly Pomona.

“There’s no doubt that the U.S. has the best schools, particularly graduate schools,” Zhou said. But in math and science, “China is more consistent, especially when it comes to the skills you need to flourish in these courses and in these professions.”

The report, “Math and Science Education in a Global Age: What the U.S. Can Learn from China,” suggests:

- National standards and aligned instruction—China touts them in math and science.
- Strong core curriculum—Biology, chemistry, and physics, as well as algebra and geometry, are mandatory to graduate from Chinese high schools.
- Rigorous teacher preparation—Much higher proportions of Chinese science and math teachers have degrees in their disciplines than their U.S. counterparts. And specialist science teachers are employed as early as third grade.
- The Chinese school year, moreover, is a full month longer at the secondary level than U.S. institutions. Overall, Chinese youngsters spend twice as many hours studying than American kids. China’s system is also famous for being exam-driven.

Yet, Ahn Do, writes that there are drawbacks to China’s set-up.



“The competition is unbelievable; it’s almost sad,” she quotes Yong Chen, professor of history at UC Irvine. Chen stresses that the Chinese method and its “overemphasis on academics makes it so hard for children to have what we call a normal childhood.”

The study, however points out that China is seeking to adapt aspects of the U.S. system, which boasts “flexible and creative approaches to learning that are central characteristics of U.S. education and necessary for innovation.”

Source—Ahn Do, *Orange County Register*

American Math Leaders Recalculate Their Approach



On September 12th, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) undertook what Stanford mathematician R. James Milgram called an “enormous evolution,” recommending a return to more traditional methods of teaching K-8 math.

This welcome move surprised and relieved scores of mathematicians, whose efforts to undo NCTM’s “fuzzy math” standards of 1989 kicked off the “math wars.” What is not as clear is whether the nation’s schools, ever susceptible to the latest progressive rhetoric, will embrace these standards as quickly as they did the disastrous 1989 standards.

NCTM Executive Director Jim Rubillo isn’t publicly admitting the about-face, instead telling the *San Francisco Chronicle* that the new guidelines are a “continuation” of the 1989

standards, and that there is no “change in philosophy.”

Perhaps NCTM’s new standards will reinvigorate schools’ interest in using Singapore’s elementary math curriculum. An article in the latest issue of *Education Next* recounts the failure of Singapore math to take hold in Montgomery County, Maryland schools, despite the fact that the curriculum is largely responsible for Singapore school children continuing to place first on the international mathematics exams. As one Montgomery County teacher put it, “Having to explain Singapore mathematics made me understand that I never really understood the mathematics I was teaching.”

Source—Teacher Quality Bulletin, published by National Council on Teacher Quality, www.nctq.org.

TEACHERS BY CALLING, PROFESSIONALS BY CHOICE

AAE's Decade of Growth

A Word from AAE Executive Director, Gary Beckner

A decade ago, the National Education Association (NEA) retained the Kamber Group, a consulting firm based in Washington, D.C., to conduct an internal study to determine, among other things, why the NEA was not attracting the new generation of teachers entering the field of education. The NEA must have been dismayed by the results of the report, which the Kamber Group entitled "An Institution at Risk."

The study found that young teachers view themselves as professionals and do not relate to labor unions or wish to be associated with them. This presents a real problem for the NEA, which is not just a union but the nation's largest labor union. Compounding the NEA's problem is the fact that there will be more new teachers hired in the next few years than in the past two decades because of retiring "baby boomer" teachers. In addition, the Kamber report shows that these new millennium teachers like many of the reform ideas that are anathema to the NEA, such as performance pay tied to accountability tests. Just the opposite, the NEA is, for better or for worse, married to a one-size-

fits-all salary structure for teachers and is against almost all accountability measures.

The report summarized that in order to reach the new generation of teachers, NEA must begin projecting a "more professional image." That was a decade ago. What has been the NEA's response? It has been busily trying to merge its state affiliates with the state affiliates of the nation's other large teacher union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), a division of the AFL/CIO. This seems to fly in the face of the Kamber Group recommendation. How does merging with an organized labor coalition like the AFL/CIO project a "more professional image"? As one member of the Florida NEA affiliate, which recently merged with the AFT group, put it, "I thought we were teachers, not Teamsters."

At about the same time that the NEA was seeing the "handwriting on the wall," a group of nationally recognized educators came together to form a new kind of teacher's association. They felt the two unions had grown monolithic and were leading our public school enterprise in

the wrong direction. This group of teachers, which includes a number of National Teachers of the Year, felt it was time for a new voice speaking for mainstream teachers in America. Enter the Association of American Educators (AAE).

A New Vision

AAE's founders had observed how political and unprofessional the teacher unions were becoming and how they frequently misrepresented the views of their own members. And it wasn't just the fact that the unions had become so politically partisan, it was also that their heavy emphasis on politics and the use of militant labor union tactics was simply not working. Teachers were not only losing respect from the public but also they were going backwards in pay, when compared to other professions over the past thirty years.

Something had to be done. The unions were incapable of morphing back into a truly professional voice for teachers, as the Kamber Group suggested.

AAE was formally incorporated as a nonprofit professional educators association, offering many of the same benefits to





teachers that the teacher unions provide, such as liability insurance, but at a fraction of the cost and without the partisan politics and controversial social agendas.

Teachers are indeed teachers by calling, but they can only be professionals by

secrets in America. There were already a dozen state-based nonunion teachers associations that thought much like we did. Three of the groups, in Texas, Missouri, and Georgia, had grown larger than the union's affiliates in those states, proving

Florida (see article on page seven). In addition, AAE has opened a Washington, D.C., office to better represent the voices of this growing independent teacher's association movement that now includes over 275,000 teachers nationwide.

AAE is the fastest growing national nonunion teachers association in America and is leading the effort to create professional career options for teachers

choice. That message is resonating with the new generation of teachers, as well as with those veterans who feel disenfranchised by the unions. AAE is the fastest growing national nonunion teachers association in America, and is leading the effort to create professional career options for teachers, unlike the other organizations that merely protect the status quo. AAE is also helping to establish state-based associations to give teachers better representation at the state level as well. When the AAE was founded, we discovered what may still be one of the best kept

that when teachers are given choices they exercise those choices. AAE immediately entered into partnership agreements with eight of those state-based groups that saw the need to build a force that can blunt the monopolistic influence of the unions at the national level and in their states. Since that time, the AAE has been working hard to launch new independent state-based groups in states where no compatible organization exists. In the last five years alone AAE has helped start groups in Arkansas, Idaho, Utah, Virginia, and Washington, and is partnering with a group in

Within a few months after AAE's incorporation, the NEA began warning its members to "watch out for this group of far right radicals," who were "antiunion and out to destroy public education." This begs the question, "When was it, exactly, that unionism became synonymous with public education?" If one objects to a labor unions' militant tactics or purely partisan politics, that doesn't mean one is out to destroy public education. AAE can help save public education, not destroy it, which is evidenced by the fact that over 95 percent of AAE's members teach in public schools. On the contrary, we believe it is the monopolistic vise-grip the unions are exerting on the system that is squeezing the life out of our profession.

There are other significant differences between the unions and the nonunion associations AAE represents. First, no matter what the unions call themselves, they

are still labor unions. While the NEA still calls itself a professional organization, the IRS has long since designated the NEA as a labor union. The AFT, on its website, calls itself, “A union of professionals.” That’s a classic oxymoron! Unionism has never been, and never will be, synonymous with professionalism. To



AAE is attracting the very best in the profession, and as professionals they know they will always be in demand.

survive, a union must do what is in the best interests of all its members, even if that means holding back some individuals from attaining higher salaries than the others. Sadly, for the field of education, that factor alone will keep many of our best students out of teaching. The top students desire the same opportunities for rewards and advancement that are offered in other professions.

It’s bad enough that teachers who aspire to be true professionals are being encumbered with a “blue collar” image because of the unions. What is more troubling is how many teachers are comfortable wearing that label, and worse, those same teachers encourage the new kids entering the field to join the “rank and file.” This in spite of mounting evidence that the teacher unions have done a lousy job of earning teachers the kind of pay and respect they seek. As an example, the latest research from the Education Research Service (ERS) survey center in Arlington, Virginia, shows that between 1995 and 2005, teacher’s salaries have declined 3.4 percent when adjusted for inflation. In comparison, the unions in nearly every

other trade at least kept their member salaries even with inflation. Former Deputy Secretary of Education Chester Finn, now a Hoover Fellow at Stanford University, put it this way, “If the number of teachers had grown apace with enrollments, and school budgets had risen as they have, teachers’ salaries today would average nearly \$100,000.” The next time a teacher hears a union representative ask, “Where would teachers be without us?” the answer should be “Much better off!”

The good news is professional teachers across America are beginning to ask some introspective questions, such as: Have teachers gained the pay and support they deserve since the union began organizing teachers into bargaining units in the 1970? Has the connection with unions helped advance the profession? Has public education improved academically?

The answer to that last question is obvious, or we wouldn’t be seeing so many urgent attempts at reforming the system. However, it would not be fair to lay the entire blame for our nation’s academic decline at the teacher union’s doorstep, although it is fair to say they haven’t helped a great deal.

Unions Against Reform

It is no secret that the unions have been fighting tooth and nail against every educational reform initiative that doesn’t serve their narrow union interests over the past twenty years.

Protecting the status quo will only put America farther behind. Besides, America already spends more per student than any other industrialized nation (although it’s difficult for a teacher at the classroom level to see the evidence of that). Ironically, unless and until the public school system is turned upside down—so that more funds can reach the classroom—pouring more money into such a bureaucratically bloated system could actually exacerbate our problems and inhibit true reform. A well-known economic rule is, if you subsidize something you just continue to get more of that something. Do we really want more bureaucracy? Still, surveys show that Americans are willing to put

even more money into education, but they are beginning to demand that our schools be held accountable for the results.

AAE Takes the Lead

AAE is a much-needed source of revitalization—advancing the field of education through cooperation, not conflict. Our younger members not only do not fear accountability, they look forward to it. The kind of teacher that joins AAE considers himself or herself a true professional. Reform initiatives such as performance pay tied to accountability measures are standards in other professions and something the new generation of teachers are more willing to embrace. In addition, AAE members are not afraid of other reform ideas such as charter schools. AAE looks at each new initiative through a lens of “What is best for children?” not just “Is it in our best interest?” AAE is attracting the very best in the profession, and as professionals they know they will always be in demand. These types of reform initiatives will only create more opportunities for teachers—opportunities to work in less constrictive environments and with different and commensurate ways of being rewarded for a job well done. Teachers need choices too.

Frankly, those teachers who have a labor union mentality should indeed fear changes to the system, as the union leaders do. AAE thinks it makes more sense to get out in front of the reform movement rather than be dragged kicking and screaming into the twenty-first century. During the first part of this century, there will be new opportunities for educators to explore innovative ways of advancing their careers. The leadership of AAE is excited about the future of our profession, and will be helping to create a new vision of what a career in teaching can and should be. ■



Gary Beckner is the Executive Director of Association of American Educators

Two New State Partners Join AAE

Teachers in Florida and Utah find freedom and quality in professional associations



Utah Council of Educators board members (left to right): Marjoe Back, Kelly Tauteoli, Jonathan Lawes, and Dave Barrett.



PEN Executive Director, Cathy DeMoisey

profit education association. Cathy DeMoisey, PEN Executive Director, says:



We believe all educators should be treated as professionals. And we are committed to seeking positive changes for Florida education. PEN officers and lobbyists follow the course of education from the committee level to the desk of the governor.

We respect the professionalism of our members by involving them in all decisions regarding the organization's legislative agenda. Like AAE, PEN does not endorse or make contributions to political candidates or political causes. We look forward to working together with AAE in helping to make the state of Florida a better place for teachers to teach and children to learn!

Utah

Utah Council of Educators (UTCE) was founded in September of this year to provide professional educators with a powerful,

Florida

Professional Educators Network of Florida (PEN) was founded in November 1995 by a group of Florida educators and other interested supporters. PEN is a statewide, non-

intellectual, and effective voice on Utah's Capitol Hill. UTCE is incorporated as a nonprofit, professional association with the purpose of improving the educative climate in Utah through deliberate, thoughtful, and targeted strategies aimed at securing greater resources for public education. Dave Barrett, president of UTCE says:



UTCE is careful not to waste resources by getting mired in divisive issues unrelated to public education. UTCE acutely focuses on strategic educational objectives and the establishment of common goals rather than getting sidetracked with controversial partisan politics. In doing so, UTCE's mission is not jeopardized by allocating resources for noneducational purposes.

As it has with a number of our other newly formed partners, the AAE Foundation has provided start-up funding to UTCE to help fulfill our long-range goal of establishing a professional state-based association in every state in the nation.

For a look at some of the other work in which your AAE Foundation is involved, and to get to know our outstanding Foundation Board Members, visit our website at www.aateachers.org. ■

At the end of the year if you are looking for a tax break, consider making a tax-deductible contribution to the AAE Foundation. You can even make contributions online. Your gift will help support our efforts to promote professionalism in education.

Association of American Educators State Partners

Arizona Professional Educators
www.azpe.org

Arkansas State Teachers Association
www.astapro.org

Associated Professional Educators of Louisiana
www.apeeducators.org

Association of Professional Oklahoma Educators
www.apoe.org

Kansas Association of American Educators
www.kanaae.org

Kentucky Association of Professional Educators
www.kentuckyteachers.org

Northwest Professional Educators
www.nwpe.org

Pennsylvania - Keystone Teachers Association
www.keyta.org

Professional Educators Network of Florida
www.penfl.org

Professional Educators of Iowa
www.peiowa.org

Professional Educators of Tennessee
www.teacherspet.com

Utah Council of Educators
www.utce.org

Virginia Professional Educators
www.VirginiaEducators.org

association of
american educators 
www.aateachers.org

A Star is Born

AAE member Angie Dorman is honored by the U.S. Department of Education

Students say that when they walk into history teacher Angie Dorman's classroom, she is there waiting to make their instruction time with her pleasant, enriching, and exciting. Now the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) has recognized the exceptional teaching of Angie Dorman of Warden, Washington.

In a surprise announcement at a school assembly, Cindi Williams from the U.S. Department of Education joined U.S. Representative Doc Hastings in honoring Angie as a No Child Left Behind 2006 American Star of Teaching.

A member of Northwest Professional Educators (an Association of American Educators affiliate), Angie is a tireless advocate for raising the standards of her students by doggedly urging them to seek college degrees.

In her community where the majority of residents are migrant workers and many students end their formal education at high school, Dorman constantly promotes high expectations. Angie has played a key role in enrolling twelve students from Warden High School at the University of Idaho. Among those students, she regularly checks in with them to see how they are doing.



Left: Holding back tears of joy, Angie accepted the U.S. Department of Education's 2006 American Star Award in front of cheering students and staff in her school's gym.

One teacher will be recognized in every state and the District of Columbia this fall. A committee of former teachers at the U.S. Department of Education selected the American Stars from among 4,000 nominations—twice as many as received in 2005—based on their success in improving academic performance and making a difference in their students' lives.

"Angie is a committed and forward-thinking professional," said Cindy Omlin, Executive Director of Northwest Professional Educators. "We are proud to have her as a member." ■

For more information about Northwest Professional Educators, visit www.nwpe.org.

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings said, "Teachers like Angie Dorman never give up on a child. They believe every child—regardless of race, income, or zip code—can achieve high standards in school...With a great teacher, every child can and will reach grade level. We're proud to honor these excellent teachers for their hard work and commitment to leaving no child behind."



Angie Dorman's work was featured in the March 2006 issue of Education Matters.