

THE KANSAS CITY KANSAN

A Different Kind of Hero, A Different Kind of Weapon

Every action film has a hero who saves the day. Usually the superhero wears a cape or has some special powers. But in the movie *Flunked*, the heroes are teachers and principals who are fighting the bad guys of declining test scores, failing grades, and inferior schools. Their weapons? Creativity and determination. The happy ending? Improved test scores, passing grades, and schools so desirable parents are waiting in line to get their kids enrolled.



**Sarah
McIntosh**

*Flint Hills
Center*

The stars of the show are education professionals from Harlem to Los Angeles who have successfully confronted the problem of a faltering education system. You won't see violence or suspense in the movie *Flunked*, but it is a scary show, as it foretells serious trouble ahead for American students.

The average American student is no longer able to compete academically. In Kansas, nearly six out of ten eighth grade students have substandard math skills, nearly half are not good readers, and four students out of ten fail to graduate from high school, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

These fundamental skills are critical in today's workplace and economy, and recent studies indicate American students are falling far behind students in other countries.

Since 1957 we have been making big promises in education and enacted massive budgets, but with little to show for it. Instead, U.S. students continue to fall behind.

But all is not lost. Student performance can be increased, and there are plenty of heroes out there who can lead the charge. The individuals showcased in this movie tell their stories of perseverance and how they changed the lives of students in their communities.

Ben Chavis is the Principal of an American Indian Public Charter School in Oakland, California. He turned what was one of the worst schools in the city to a top performing school in the state. (Mr. Chavis now runs five schools in Oakland).

Howard Lappin was the leader who turned the Foshay Learning Center in L.A. from a school no one wanted to attend to a place where parents and students fought to get in the district limits.

Steve Barr, founder of Green Dot Schools in L.A., operates five schools, which are combating the low performance of area students.

Karen Jones, Principal of a school in Harlem, New York has boosted the test scores of her students by leaps and bounds.

How did Ben, Howard, Steve, and Karen do it? There was no one magic formula, but they and others share their stories of success in hopes to inspire more education all-stars. Many of the same themes did, however, run through their programs. Most of the schools shown in the film emphasized the importance of empowering teachers to design their own curriculum and choose their own books. Other key commonalities included not dumbing down their curriculums but truly challenging their students, focusing not on the bricks and mortar of their facilities but more on paying teachers well, and finding ways to increase student attendance.

Kansas is full of potential all-stars. We have many dedicated, hard-working teachers, principals, and parents. It's time for us to realize that it isn't a losing battle. We can increase student performance in Kansas and become a competitor in the world economy.

Big promises and massive budgets may have good intentions but what is needed is real change on how we approach education in the U.S. It's time to start delivering choice and options for our students. It might be a cliché, but our children *are* our future.

If you are interested in watching this film it is available for purchase at www.flunkedthemovie.com.

Sarah McIntosh is Vice President of Programs for the Kansas-based Flint Hills Center for Public Policy. A complete bio on Ms. McIntosh can be found at <http://www.flinthills.org/content/view/24/39/>, and she can be reached at sarah.mcintosh@flinthills.org. To learn more about the Flint Hills Center, please visit www.flinthills.org.