

10 EDUCATION-RELATED MOVIES ALL TEACHERS SHOULD WATCH

The factor that ultimately determines how successful students will become academically is the teacher(s) that they are assigned to. The qualities of good teachers are varied; some are effective using kindness, while others set a high bar for their students and never waver. Each teacher will have to find his or her way through the everyday practice of being in a classroom, and no two teachers will educate in the same way. Like all aspects of our lives, including love and relationships, Americans grow up watching teachers on the big screen. Movies that celebrate strong teachers inspire the next generation, particularly when it comes to underprivileged schools.

What if all teachers in America were “required” to watch and thoroughly discuss the movies on my list? With one exception, all these movies deal with rebellious and underprivileged youth in urban schools and economically depressed family backgrounds.

What these movies have in common are teachers who rise to the occasion and whose methods are unorthodox. They are all unconventional in their methods, but they are all – or become – dedicated and compassionate and completely concerned with the welfare their students – as opposed to principals, fellow teachers or even school boards.

Here are ten films all teachers must watch.

1. ***In To Sir, with Love (1967)***: Mark Thackeray (Sidney Poitier), an engineer by trade, comes to teach a class in the East End of London, full of obnoxious and unruly and underprivileged white students. He wins them over once he abandons the posture of the “typical” teacher and begins to level with them. He teaches them that to have respect for others, they first have to learn to respect themselves. In the end, what was to be a temporary job becomes his vocation. Everything we see in this movie is worthy of emulation by all teachers everywhere.
2. ***Up the Down Staircase (1967)***: In this classic, a young idealistic woman, Sylvia Barrett (Sandy Dennis) starts teaching in a “problem” school in an urban setting — a really rough neighborhood. At first she is naïve and her students laugh at her. But slowly she begins to think about what kind of “kids” her students are, and begins to see them not as enemies, but as young people who need her help to get out of the cycle they are in. Eventually she breaks through to them, not so much by breaking the rules, but through compassion and



understanding. Once again, it's the quality of the teacher that makes the difference and her dedication to her profession (which, once more, becomes permanent).

3. **Teachers (1984):** This is another one where we have yet another underprivileged school in a tough neighborhood. Here, the hero is Alex Jurel (played by Nick Nolte), but the most interesting and memorable feature of this movie involves another character (Herbert Gower) played by Richard Mulligan. When a mental institution tours the school, Herbert detaches himself from the inmates and takes over a history class. His first act as authority figure in the classroom is to pick up the textbook, look at it, frown, and walk to the window and toss it out, to the surprise and delight of the entire class. By the time he is found out and taken back to the mental institution, he has managed to transform the whole idea of teaching history. As he is led by attendants from the mental institution through the crowded corridor of the school, the teacher played by Nick Nolte salutes him in an obvious sign of respect. Perhaps all good teachers should be a little crazy? Not a bad idea.
4. **Dead Poets Society (1989):** This is the exception to the underprivileged rule. Here we are not in an inner-city school, but in a privileged private school for boys. John Keating (Robin Williams), an alumnus of Welton Academy in Vermont, comes back to his alma mater as an English teacher. His first act of business is to invoke the carpe diem theme and thereby to encourage his students to live in the present and to love poetry. His asking them to tear out the introductory pages from the textbook is another brilliant move. He calls that kind of "literary" claptrap "excrement."

This is another brilliant teacher who breaks the rules, and that's really the secret of his success. In the end, he is betrayed – both by the administration and one of his own students. He is made the scapegoat for the suicide of a student whose egomaniacal and rigid father drove him to it, but Keating's teaching ends up being blamed for it. The real tragedy of this story is that a clearly brilliant and unconventional teacher is booted out for all the wrong reasons. When after his departure things get back to "normal," things also return to being hollow and insipid.

5. **Lean on Me (1989).** This is not really about a teacher per se, but about a principal. Joe Clark (Morgan Freeman) comes to save a school about to be taken over by the state. It is run down and full of rebellious and even criminal-minded young people. Joe Clark, the principal with the baseball bat, quickly tries to run the school like some angry but well-meaning despot. At first his teachers are against his methods (and critics of the movie made the same mistake), but as both students and teachers warm up to him, it's clear that what he is doing is really working.


He does, however, have his enemies; particularly one member of the School Board, who is trying to get him fired. When he is caught chaining the school doors against the fire department's regulation, he is put in jail, and the School Board convenes a special session to decide if he should be fired. But the students show up in front of the jail en masse and demand his release, which is eventually granted. Immediately after his release, he receives good news; the entire student body has passed the test administered by the state. This movie is yet another shining example of a dedicated educator who breaks the rules and succeeds precisely for that reason.



6. ***Dangerous Minds (1995)***. This may begin to sound like a litany, but *Dangerous Minds* is yet another story (based on a true story) involving the dedication of a teacher in an underprivileged school. Here Michelle Pfeiffer plays the real-life LouAnne Johnson, whose story the movie is based on. Johnson, an ex-Marine, is hired on the spot without really being informed of the kind of class she is to teach. Her students are not interested in learning, are disrespectful and the class is basically in chaos. At first she almost gives up in frustration, but then she decides not to. Once she has made up in her mind that she is going to win over the students, the “battle” begins. Once more, we have a movie about a teacher who breaks as many rules as it takes. In the end, the class is completely won over. In fact, they not only start learning and enjoying it, but they have also come to love and respect their teacher along the way.
7. ***Freedom Writers (2007)***. This is based on another true story. Here Hilary Swank plays the real-life Erin Gruwell. Her dedication also leads to a compassionate understanding of her underprivileged students, and she achieves the ultimate breakthrough when she informs them that they aren’t the first young people besieged by problems. Although she is not permitted to use *The Diary of Anne Frank*, she does precisely that, at her own expense. She also buys notebooks for her students and encourages them to keep diaries that she would only read if they permitted her to do so. Needless to say, breaking all the rules once more allows her to become an exceptional teacher whom her students come to love.
8. ***Won’t Back Down (2012)***: Teachers unions panned this one because of its implications that organizations like theirs were to blame for school underperformance. At the heart of the movie, though, is a teacher (played by Viola Davis) partnering with parents to make a difference in the lives of the people who mattered: students. The movie is set in Pittsburgh which I think is important because it tells an urban, inner-city story. I think this is the type of film that makes people uncomfortable, but in all the right ways. I also appreciate that in this film parents are part of the solution – I think that in and of itself is a powerful message to teachers.
9. ***Remember the Titans (2000)***: There are teachers in the classroom, and there are teachers outside it. This Denzel Washington classic shows that character and belief, despite all odds, can overcome a lot. The racial tensions in the movie demonstrated through a high school football team also show how schools are at often at the front lines of social change. Important changes do not just happen overnight, either. They take dedication, especially when the stakes are high. Washington’s character isn’t easy on his students either. He pushes them to point of being uncomfortable but brings them past their barriers in the process.
10. ***Stand and Deliver (1988)***: It’s not easy to teach students who are not willing to learn, particularly if the subject is calculus. In this Edward James Olmos classic, he takes control of a class of dropout prone students and not only keeps them in school, but teaches them some of the toughest topics. The students featured are not surprisingly urban and low-income (but some of the strongest teachers are needed in these very schools, even today). Where this movie was ahead of its time was in its depiction of Hispanic students. Other movies with students in need of saving had maybe one or two Hispanic characters, but the high school in this one is predominantly full of this demographic. Since 1988, the Hispanic K-12 population has exploded, making this movie even more relevant and impactful to the educators of today.

In many of these movies, the teachers begin as outsiders to their students, and end up becoming peers (and in some cases, an outsider to other teachers and administrators). The teachers take their eyes off





the curriculum to look at what their students really need to learn, even if that means tearing pages out of textbooks, or throwing them out the window.

Another thing I have noticed about many of these films is that they are good at pointing out that you can't have a great school by making everything and everyone wear the same straitjacket. Rules and regulations are fine, provided that they don't interfere with the real business of teaching. These fictional and real-life educators got through to their students by leveling with them, by understanding where they come from, and by empathizing with their struggles.

All 10 of the movies I put on my list are ones that made me stop and think about my career when I first saw them. Scenes from them still pop in my head and in some cases, inspire me. It can be so easy to get caught up in the monotony and paper-pushing of the education industry and in the process, lose sight of the truly important parts of teaching. Taking a few moments to watch these movies for the first time, or re-watch them, can restore your faith in the profession. After all, no one ever got into teaching to fill out reports correctly, or pass through as many students as possible. We all have our deep-seeded reasons for becoming educators and the characteristics we see on the screen in these movies remind us of our own ideals.

