Excerpt from

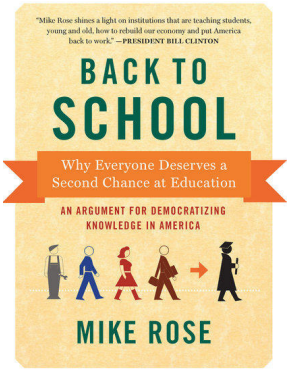
BACK TO SCHOOL

by Mike Rose

Full Cognitive Throttle: When Education for Work Ignites the Mind

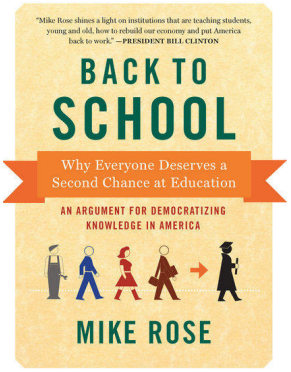
As I EXIT THE freeway into the center of the overcast city, it is close to seven in the morning. A homeless man with a handwritten sign–"Vietnam vet"–stands at the bottom of the off-ramp. Behind him is a three-story building, the top floor burned out; big, fat-lettered graffiti covers the blackened name of the company. I turn left toward the parking lot of my destination, a community college serving one of the poorest parts of the city. I pass a small used-car lot, another boarded-up building, and several machine shops still in operation. The streets are gray and nearly empty. Then, on the right, the college and heightened activity. Cars and buses are pulling over to the curb to drop people off; students wearing backpacks weave their bicycles in and out of traffic; the light turns green, and a crowd that just got off a commuter train streams onto the campus.

After years of neglect, students like these–and the colleges that serve them–are the focus of national attention. Although many states are slashing education budgets, federal and private philanthropic initiatives are providing some help for people who are economically, and often educationally, disadvantaged to pursue further schooling. I play a tiny role in this effort as part of a research team that is trying to get a better handle on what enables or impedes educational success for this group. What makes it possible for these students to walk onto this campus an hour after sunrise, heading toward a nursing or electrical construction or English class? What jobs–if they have them–are flexible enough to allow time for school? Are these people going



from here to work or coming in after the night shift? What child-care arrangements do they have? How about transportation? Although many of the college's students are local, a number come from fairly far away by bus or train to attend its well-respected occupational programs. One young woman I interviewed gets up at 3:30 in the morning to begin the trek to her 7:00 A.M. class. Hardships of that order are obviously threats to achievement. But I'm just as interested–more so, really–in what pulls these students forward, the desire that gets them through the door. I understand it just a little better every time I visit a place like this.

Come along with me for the first day of one of the college's programs for people who have low academic skills (many of them didn't finish high school) but who want to prepare for a skilled trade. The director of the program is standing at a lectern at the front of a large classroom; before her are twenty-five or so students sitting quietly in plastic chairs at eight long tables. The director has a serious demeanor, but her voice is inviting. Behind her hang an expansive whiteboard and a screen for Powerpoint or video presentations. I lean back and look around the windowless room: the walls are bare, institutional cream, clean and spare. The students are Black and Latino, a few more women than men. Most appear to be in their early twenties to early thirties, with one man, who looks like he's had a hard time of it, in his mid-forties. "Welcome to college," the director says. "I congratulate you." She then asks each of them to talk a little about what motivates them and why they're here.



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The economic motive looms large. One guy laughs, "I don't want to work a crappy job all my life." A woman in the back says she wants to get her high school diploma "to get some money to take care of myself." But people give a lot of other reasons for being here, too: to "learn more," to be a "role model for my kids," to get "a career to support my daughter," to "have a better life." The director turns to the older man. "I'm illiterate," he says in a halting voice, "and I want to learn to read and write."

The semester before, when students wrote out their reasons for attending the program, the range of responses was even wider. Again, the economic motive was central, but there were also these comments, some written in neat cursive, some in scratchy, uneven print: "learning new things I never thought about before"; "I want my kids too know that I can write and read"; "Hope Fully with this program I could turn my life around"; "to develope better social skills and better speech"; "I want to be somebody in this world"; "I like to do test and essay like it is part of my life."

Combined, these testimonies offer a rich vision of the goals of education. Yet nearly every speech, policy document, and op-ed piece on educational initiatives aimed at poor people is focused wholly on schooling's economic benefits. Speaking in September 2009 at a community college in Troy, New York, President Obama said, "The power of these institutions [is] to prepare students for 21st-century jobs." Given the complex nature of the economy in our time–not only the recession but the changing nature and distribution of work–the people in this program certainly want the president's statement to be true. But they are

also here for so much more. They want to do something good for themselves and their families. They want to be better able to help their kids with school. They want to have another go at education and change what it means to them. They want to learn new things and to gain a sense–and the certification–of competence. They want to redefine who they are. A lot is riding on this attempt to reenter school; no wonder, as I sit in this classroom, the hope and desire are almost palpable.

At the table right in front of me, a slight young woman with ***Love*** woven on the back of her black sweatshirt is leaning in toward the director as she talks. Whenever the director gives out a piece of information–about textbooks, about the tutoring center–the woman takes notes. I know from talking to many other students over the years the sense of excitement they feel at a time like this: a sense of life opening up but also the foreignness of it all, the uncertainty.

The director announces that it's time for a quick tour of the campus, and off we go to the bookstore, the administration building, the office for students with disabilities. The students walk in groups of two or three, talking, looking at this new campus landscape. A few walk alone. The young woman in the black sweatshirt stays close to the director. Toward the end of the tour, we pause before the child-care center. The director asks, "Who has kids?" A number of people say they do, raising their hands. The young woman slips her pen into the pocket of her ***Love*** sweatshirt and brings her hand slowly to her shoulder.

Mike Rose is the son of working class Italian-immigrant parents who settled in South Los Angeles in the 1950s. Rose, a long-time advocate for underrepresented students in higher education, is an award-winning non-fiction writer.

He is the recipient of numerous writing and educator awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, the David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English from NCTE, UCLA's Distinguished Teaching Award in 2005, and winner of the Commonwealth Club of California Award for Literary Excellence in Nonfiction.

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