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## Back to School 2006

*brought to you by Bausch & Lomb*

Here's how five communities are making sure their children get a quality education.

## Good Schools Can Happen

**By Lyric Wallwork Winik**  
**Published: August 27, 2006**

*The decline of our public schools is a well-known story. Where once the U.S. led the world in high school graduation rates, we're now below average among developed nations. Yet it isn't as hopeless as it seems. Across the nation, schools are defying expectations and succeeding. What makes them different? In nearly every case, a community rallied to improve its schools.*

*We all reap rewards from good schools: The education of young people affects everything from the economy to national security. The key is to get involved, whether or not you have children. Here are five stories of places and lives that have been turned around.*

## **Demand better teachers** **Chattanooga, Tenn.**

The story was grim. In 2000, Chattanooga was home to nine of the worst elementary schools in the state; only 18% of third-graders were reading at or above grade level, and nearly all were poor. When Chattanooga's local Public Education Foundation (PEF) asked what needed to be done, residents answered: "Get a quality teacher in every classroom." Then the community and the schools made that happen. Teachers had to reapply for their jobs; 100 of them left. Teachers and principals went through rigorous retraining, paid for in part by a \$5 million grant. The local university offered a special free master's program just for teachers in those failing schools. The Urban League started an afterschool literacy program. The mayor's office established a bonus program for high-performing teachers. Lawyers from the Bar Association offered free legal services for teachers. And community volunteers partnered with parents to help them read to their kids at home. Today, 74% of the students test as proficient or advanced in reading, and the once-failing schools have "outgained more than 90% of all the schools in the state," says PEF President Dan Challener. Now, he and others are focusing on the county's middle schools. "Our motto is 'Every Classroom, Every Day,'" he says.

## **Make schools a family resource** **Long Beach, Calif.**

Down the highway from the extreme wealth of Beverly Hills, Long Beach has the country's third highest youth poverty rate: Few of the students at the Stevenson-YMCA Community School can afford lunch. Yet this elementary school was named a California Distinguished School, thanks to a special partnership with the YMCA that began nine years ago. The Y operates inside the school, running an after-school program in conjunction with the teachers and linking the school with the community. "In an elementary school, you can't bring the kids along unless you bring the family along," says Bob Cabeza, the YMCA's executive director.

"About 200 parents and community residents are involved in the classroom," adds Cabeza. One of the kids benefiting is Eric Brooks, 7, who also participates in an after-school program that encourages a love of reading. The Y partnership trains parents in literacy skills, then sends them out to teach other parents at home. The school also offers parents computer and English classes and teaches conflict resolution and fosters community projects: Parents collected 700 signatures to repair years of broken sidewalks near the school.

Involving parents means changing attitudes. “You have to change preconceived notions,” says Cabeza. “Some of our parents haven’t even passed the sixth grade. They see schools as failures. Yet all parents bring a lot to the table. You have to value their skills.”

### **Challenge the entire community to get involved** **Cleveland Heights, Ohio**

Joy Henderson’s daughter was falling through the cracks at her high school. “We had a two-tier school,” explains Henderson. “The self-motivated students were getting into the best colleges in the country, but for the kids who weren’t being engaged, well, heartbreaking is the word that comes to mind.” So, in 2002, Henderson, a former geologist, got involved when the school joined Ohio’s High School Transformation Initiative to turn large schools into small communities. Cleveland Heights High—which had been on the state’s “Academic Watch” list—was slated to be transformed into five small schools within the building, each with its own office, principal, guidance counselors and teachers.

A local nonprofit hosted forums where parents and others in the community shared their hopes for the school with teachers and administrators. Governance boards—including students, parent community leaders and school staff—were created to guide the school’s direction. “Working on a common mission together is how you build trust,” says Henderson, now a parent-community liaison.

Today, the school has been rated “Effective” on the annual Ohio Report Card, and the five principals walk the halls and call students by their names. Community and school continue to reach out to each other. Henderson recalls the day 11th-graders met with local residents to learn about different jobs. The kids were overwhelmed by the effort people made to provide them with a rich experience. “And the community people said, ‘These are great kids,’” says Henderson, adding, “They really are.”

### **Start a mentor program** **Bridgeport, Conn.**

Five thousand students attend public high schools in Bridgeport. Together, they speak more than 60 languages. But Connecticut’s largest city struggles to send its kids on to college. Often the first in their families to attend high school, many of these students don’t realize that college is an option for them—much less know how to apply. To help, the Bridgeport Public Education Fund created a program called Mentoring for Academic Achievement and College Success that pairs local college students with high school kids for at least an hour a week. Clare Scarnecchia, 22, was a student at Fairfield University when she discovered the program. Every week, she helped students with schoolwork, gave advice about financial aid and often just listened. “Many didn’t have support at home or from their teachers,” says Scarnecchia. “They just needed to know that someone was there, encouraging them.”

Since 1988, nearly 3,000 Bridgeport students have participated in the program; 95% of those who were mentored for at least two years went on to college.

### **Use the brainpower of business leaders**

## Mobile, Ala.

In 2001, Alabama's largest school district was so troubled that it was scheduled to be taken over by the state: Test scores were terrible, and voters hadn't approved new funding for the district in 41 years. The business community was feeling the failure too. "When we'd work on recruiting businesses to come to Mobile, one of their first questions was, 'Tell me about your education system,'" says Leigh Perry Herndon of the Chamber of Commerce. "We knew it wouldn't improve unless we got involved."

Business leaders joined civic leaders to push for a new property tax to fund the schools: 10,000 people turned out to rally before the vote. The tax passed. Next the schools had to be turned around. "A lot of people cared but didn't know what to do," notes Herndon. "We told them, 'Your money is great, but let us have your brainpower. Help make real-world business lessons translate into the classroom.'"

One such initiative by the Chamber of Commerce created an apprentice program that brought students into local hospitals and clinics to learn about health care. As a result, in the last two years, 7% more students have pursued studies or careers in that field.

In addition, businesses have sent employees into the school system to help develop lesson plans. Across Mobile, test scores are up and college scholarships are at a record \$54 million. "People are getting genuine ownership of their public schools," says Carolyn Akers of the Mobile Area Education Foundation.

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## Help Give Kids Good Schools

Nothing is more important to our nation and its future than our children. The Public Education Network (PEN) is launching a campaign to provide individuals and communities with the information and tools to give every child in America a quality education. Says PEN President Wendy Puriefoy: "We can make a difference. But it will require each one of us to take action."

Log onto [www.GiveKidsGoodSchools.org](http://www.GiveKidsGoodSchools.org) and find out how you can:

- **Learn the facts** about public schools in your community.
- **Vote for issues** that make a positive difference for public education.
- **Act** by letting elected officials and others know that quality public education is a top priority on Election Day and every day.

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## 8 Characteristics of Good Schools

Experts agree that quality public schools share the following characteristics:

1. High expectations for every student

2. Parent and community support
3. A rigorous curriculum and fair assessments
4. Sufficient resources to help all students achieve
5. Safe, healthy and supportive learning environments
6. Schools and classrooms equipped for teaching and learning
7. Qualified teachers in every classroom
8. Strong school leadership

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## Afterschool Programs

By *Liz Nusken* on 9/5/2006 2:15:PM

Research shows that afterschool programs, like those mentioned in this article, can improve grades, school attendance and behavior. Often overlooked, afterschool programs are important to student success, working families and communities.

## Lewis School

By *katelyn* on 8/29/2006 10:28:AM

I'm 17 and a senior this fall. I go to this school called the Lewis School of Princeton and it's absolutely amazing. I have learnin differences and am no longer afraid to say it. I was struggling tremendously in school and didn't know what was wrong with me until one sunny summer day last summer, when i was visiting my grandma from my home town of North Richland Hills, Texas. Switched all the way from Texas to go here, and it's been the best decision of my life. I had a learning disability called Auditory Processing difficulties. It took me ages to just get a question into my mind that the teacher would ask, but with the help and support of this school, everything changed for me. And fast too, i only wen't there for a year and i'm amazed by my transformation. You should check them out. It's crazy because i never knew so many people had it; but results show 1 in 4 peopl have it.... so you're child might as well!

## Apathy is an epidemic

By *iluvaparade* on 8/29/2006 9:05:AM

I have had the worst bad-school encounters with administrators, who are the ones you have to get past before your kid can begin receiving any education, good or bad. Lost paperwork, the "I'll get to it when I get to it" attitude, and passive-aggressive behavior are the main problems. They specialize in wearing you out so you'll give up and stop bothering them. These are entrenched bureaucrats, far below the radar in most cases, and something really needs to be done.

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