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Purpose

The purpose of *The Education Innovator* is to promote innovative practices in education, to offer features on promising programs and practices, as well as information on innovative research, schools, policies, and trends, and to keep readers informed about key departmental priorities and activities. The Department of Education's Office of Innovation and Improvement (OII) and the Office of Communications and Outreach (OCO) share the responsibility for *The Innovator's* research, writing and production.

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Feature

K-8 Charter Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap

Latest Innovations in Education Guide Offers Portraits of Good Schools and Best Practices

Success is not achieved by good luck alone. Ask any successful person – an athlete, a musician, a business leader, a college student—and he or she will agree. Successful individuals may have unique strategies for attaining their goals, but they also have common ways for getting to the top. They all set lofty goals and work daily to meet them, and they use strategies and techniques to stay motivated to achieve what they set out to do. Highly successful people may seem different from some of us, but they epitomize the potential in all of us. Perhaps that is what the charter schools that are highlighted in the [new guide](#), *K-8 Charter Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap*, have in common; they are all willing to set goals and use common strategies to achieve them – and by doing so are focusing new attention on a non-traditional academic approach to closing the achievement gap.

Since the first charter school legislation passed in Minnesota in 1991, the number of charter schools nationwide has grown rapidly. Currently, 40 states and the District of Columbia had adopted charter school laws. For the 2007-08 school year, 347 new charter schools opened, representing an 8 percent increase over the previous year, and bringing the total number of charter schools to more than 4,100, serving over 1,200,000 students.

While additional academic achievement data comparing students in charter schools to those in traditional public schools is needed, it appears that charter schools, as an innovation in K-12 education, may be making progress over time because they are better positioned to innovate and excel, especially in areas such as school climate and the ability to meet individual students' needs. In one study, charter schools that had been open for at least nine years showed an advantage over their neighboring traditional public schools. This 2004 nationwide study found that 10 percent more charter school students demonstrated proficiency on state reading and math exams compared to students in nearby traditional public schools.*

The schools featured in the *K-8 Charter Schools* guide are all making significant gains in closing the achievement gap in their respective school communities. They were selected through a multi-step process, one that included such factors as overall achievement levels and test scores in comparison to similar schools in the same cities or states. An external advisory panel of charter school researchers, charter school practitioners, and representatives from various organizations working to support charter schools helped develop a research-based conceptual framework used to analyze candidate schools and to inform the site selection process. To be considered, a school had to show solid evidence of effectively closing the achievement gap by outperforming local district schools serving a similar population of students, or by having different student subgroups—including African-American and Hispanic students, special education students, English language learners, and students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals—exceed state averages in math and reading.

The approaches of the seven featured schools vary considerably, but they all share common factors that make them successful in closing the achievement gap.

Education Secretary Margaret Spellings said in her introduction to the guide that, “the seven schools profiled in the guide are dispelling the myth that some students cannot achieve to high standards.” The schools are “acting as laboratories for innovative education practices.” Here are a few detailed examples of the strategies they are using which are yielding impressive results.

Common Factors Among All Schools

As a group, these charter schools operate in different geographic locations, serve a range of student populations, and offer different approaches to curriculum and instruction. However, the schools share important characteristics to achieve a common goal: create learning environments where historically underserved children will thrive. Aside



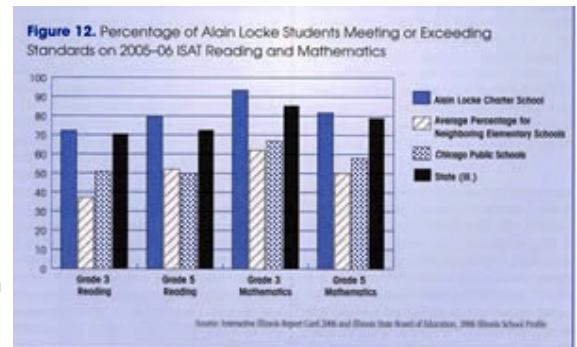
from closing the achievement gap, which all of the school are doing successfully, here are some other factors that make a difference:

1. The schools are mission-driven. They have a clear focus on ensuring student success, and everyone involved stays committed to the mission. This includes the leadership, the teachers, parents, students, and sometimes the whole family.
2. The schools have created a safe learning environment and a strong school culture, creating a uniquely focused community. The school environment is taken seriously, and the students' personal safety is as well. The positive school culture also assumes that the students can meet the high expectations that are stressed, and remediation is provided if necessary.
3. Another key factor is the way in which charter school teachers respond to students' needs. Charter schools have more freedom than traditional public schools. Their teachers see themselves teaching for mastery. They work long hours and spend extra time with students who need it. Instruction is still geared toward teaching to state standards, but teachers in charter schools can approach material in innovative ways.
4. There is a high expectation that parents are partners with the school, and in some cases, parent involvement is formalized through contracts referred to as "a commitment to excellence."
5. As charter-governed institutions, the schools have the independence to make creative scheduling, curriculum, and instruction decisions. This is known as "innovating across the program." The flexibility to customize their programs to fit the needs of their particular communities, each with varying student populations, is enabling the schools to deliver on their promises.
6. Charter schools hold themselves accountable. They are set up with governing boards that generate creative solutions to challenges, hold staff accountable for results, and can make decisions quickly. The boards oversee all aspects of the schools – fiscal health, management, and leadership. A board's members help form community partnerships and raise money, which is spent wisely in support of a school's mission.
7. The schools are able to attract and retain excellent teachers because the schools are committed to continuous internal professional development. They can also offer bonuses or merit pay for meeting student achievement goals, teacher attendance, and investing additional time in after-school tutoring, Saturday classes, and summer school. When schools look for new hires, besides looking at an applicant's education background and credentials, they often look for those who are willing to put in the time and effort required to meet the school's goals.

Putting the Innovative Approach into Practice

At Alain Locke Charter Academy in Chicago, Ill., the majority of students in 3rd and 5th grades met state standards in math and reading in 2005-06, surpassing the performance of students in both neighboring schools as well as throughout the state. How did they do it? Acting on the belief that all children, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background, can succeed if given quality educational opportunities, Patrick Ryan, Jr., founder of Inner-City Teaching Corp (ICTC), opened Alain Locke Charter Academy in 1999. Named in honor of the first African-American Rhodes scholar, Alain Locke is guided by the principle of "absolute excellence" and dedicated to producing globally competitive students.

While the school struggled at first, Alain Locke was transformed under the leadership of a new principal, Lennie Jones, in 2002, who made sure the school's faculty, students, and their families kept their eyes on the school's mission – "to transform education in underserved communities and to empower children in urban schools." All students, parents, and staff take learning seriously and sign a contract that focuses on excellence and expectations for all members of the school community. Since 2002, the school has established a standards-based curriculum in five core academic areas. They also have an experience-based learning element that relies on community partnerships and gives the school much-needed resources. Parent and family involvement contribute to the school's success, as does the explicit teacher training on standards-based lesson planning and staff retreats that give staff an opportunity to re-examine the mission and review policies and procedures each school year.



The schools profiled in *K-8 Charter Schools* are both rural and urban, but whatever the community they serve, they share a commitment to teaching for mastery. For example, two of the schools—the Carl C. Icahn Charter School in the Bronx, NY, and the Cesar Chavez Academy (CCA) in Pueblo, Colo.—have found engaging ways to teach rigorous content, based on state standards, through the use of *Core Knowledge*, a curriculum focusing on the key concepts of western civilizations in mathematics, language, science, the arts, and the humanities.

The challenging curriculum—developed by E.D. Hirsch—was chosen by Icahn's founding principal, Jeffrey Litt, despite his colleagues' admonitions that it would not work in the Bronx where "the kids were too poor." Rather than lower the school's expectations, Litt adapted *Core Knowledge* to make it more accessible to his inner-city students. In doing so, his students realized success in spite of the perceived odds. Such rich content is often combined with atypical school schedules to ensure that students can master important concepts that stay with them for a lifetime, not just until the end of a semester.

At CCA, *Core Knowledge* is combined with the principles of hard work, responsibility, resourcefulness, and loyalty to the golden rule. In addition, the curriculum emphasizes Hispanic history, culture and the native languages of Latinos. The bottom line, according to CCA principal Lawrence Hernandez, is "all students succeed because we don't allow them to fail." At CCA, student success is not left to chance. As a result, the school has a 3,000-student waiting list and students consistently outperform not only the neighborhood schools serving similar populations, but also those schools with students from higher-income families.

Common characteristics and innovative ways of putting them into practice unite all of the schools in *K-8 Charter Schools Closing the Achievement Gap*. The results are positive, the bar is high, and the schools are closing the achievement gap in ways from which all schools can learn.

*Hoxby, C.M. 2004. *Achievement in Charter Schools and Regular Public Schools in the United States: Understanding the Differences*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University and National Bureau of Economic Research.

Note: Readers should judge for themselves the merits of the practices implemented in the schools profiled in the new Innovations in Education guide. The descriptions of the schools and their methodologies do not constitute an endorsement of specific practices or products by the U.S. Department of Education.

Key Resources

- [Innovations In Education Book Series](#)
- [U.S. Charter Schools Web site](#)
- [Education Commission of the States](#)
- [National Charter School Research Project](#)
- [National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#)
- [Thomas B. Fordham Foundation](#)

Please send questions, comments, and suggestions to [The Innovator Webmasters](#).



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What's New ?

From the U.S. Department of Education

U.S. Secretary of Education Spellings participated in a three-day, four-city No Child Left Behind (NCLB) [bus tour](#). She hosted a [National Parent Town Hall meeting](#), announced the [Empowering Parents School Box](#), highlighted the [FAFSA4caster](#), an online tool that helps families plan financially for college, and talked about reauthorizing NCLB. (Sept. 19 – 21)

Education Secretary Margaret Spellings [honored](#) President Lyndon Baines Johnson in a ceremony officially renaming the U.S. Department of Education building at 400 Maryland Avenue, S.W. in Washington, D.C., as the Lyndon Baines Johnson Department of Education Building. (Sept. 17)

Secretary Spellings issued a [statement](#) on the importance of recognizing the celebration of Constitution Day. She praised the U.S. Department of Education's Teaching American History program for helping to bring history alive for millions of students. (Sept. 17)

Secretary Spellings delivered [remarks](#) on the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) to members of the [Business Coalition for Student Achievement](#) in Washington, D.C. She highlighted how NCLB is working to raise student achievement and accountability in America's public schools. (Sept. 5)

Secretary Spellings made a [statement](#) on the Class of 2007's SAT scores, reaffirming the need for greater accountability and increased rigor in our nation's high schools in order to prepare students for college and the workforce. (Aug. 29)

During Back to School, the Department is honoring the 2007 [American Stars of Teaching](#) -- teachers who are improving student achievement and using innovative strategies to make a difference in the lives of their students. One American Star will be recognized in every state and the District of Columbia with surprise school visits. Nominations for the 2008 American Stars will be accepted beginning in January.

A new [report](#) from the Department of Education - *Private School Participants in Programs under the No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: Private School and Public School District Perspectives*, describes private school participants in federal education programs through surveys conducted in 2005-06 of public school districts and private schools. (August 2007)

Education News Parents Can Use – The September edition of the U.S. Department of Education's live monthly television program profiled programs that provide parents with choices and encourage parent involvement as a mechanism to improve student achievement; showcased charter schools as an effective vehicle for helping students learn and close the academic achievement gap; and provided tips and resources for parents to help ensure their children succeed this academic year. To watch the archived webcast, visit: www.ed.gov/edtv

From the Office of Innovation and Improvement

Charter Schools

Herbert J. [Walberg](#) bases his new [book](#) on the premise that U.S. schools lag behind their international counterparts, while exploring the results of school choice experiments in this country. *School Choice: The Findings* includes chapters on charter schools, education vouchers, and private schools, as well as external factors influencing school choice such as parental satisfaction with local schools. The [book](#) may be purchased online. (Aug. 27)

The rapid expansion of some charter schools across the country highlights the potential for such organizations to provide more high-quality public school options for students and families. However, a [report](#) from the National Charter School Research Project shows that efforts to quickly expand successful charter schools through "managed growth" may not be easy. (August 2007)

Closing the Achievement Gap

Despite achievement gaps, students in Pittsburgh, Pa. who have good teachers are the most likely to succeed, according to a two-year Pittsburgh public schools [study](#). "In Pittsburgh, the teachers who are successful are successful with black kids and white kids," said lead author Robert P. Strauss, an economics and public policy professor at Carnegie Mellon University. (Sept. 10)

White students are less likely to attend nearly all-white public schools, while African-American and Hispanic students are more likely to attend nearly all-minority schools, according to a new [report](#) from the Pew Hispanic Center. About 31 percent of black students and 29 percent of Hispanic students attended nearly all-minority schools in 2005-2006, up from 28 percent for black students and 25 percent for Hispanic students in 1993-1994. During the same period, the proportion of white students attending nearly all-white public schools fell from 34 percent to 21 percent. (Aug. 30)

Back-to-School

It's time for pencils and crayons, chalkboards and whiteboards, pencils and laptops! Back-to-school season is in full swing, and to mark this time of year, the [U.S. Census Bureau](#) has crunched some special numbers,

which include everything from the amount of money spent at family clothing stores in August 2006 (\$7.1 billion) to the projected number of high school diplomas that will be awarded in the 2007-2008 school year (3.3 million). (Sept. 27)

Teachers looking for interesting lessons to kick off the new school year in subjects such as history, mathematics, science, and language arts can find what they are looking for on the Federal Resources for Educational Excellence ([FREE](#)) Web site, from the U.S. Department of Education. New lesson plans include "Monumental Sculpture from Renaissance Florence," "Brain: Our Sense of Self," and "Poetry Out Loud." (Sept. 27)

Grants and Awards

Harvard University is accepting applications for its annual [Innovations in American Government Award](#). Administered by the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, the award is given to programs that serve as examples of creative and effective government at all levels. Winners will receive a \$100,000 grant to support replication and dissemination activities. The application deadline is Oct. 15. (Sept. 27)

Vernier Software and Technology and the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) are offering science teachers in K-12 schools and in colleges and universities [awards](#) to promote the innovative use of data-collection technology in their science classrooms. Each award will consist of \$1,000 in cash for the teacher, \$1,000 in Vernier products, and up to \$1,000 toward expenses to attend the 2007 NSTA National Convention. The application deadline is Oct. 15. (Sept. 27)

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) will celebrate the accomplishments of young educators who achieve excellence and equity in teaching and learning. A candidate for the ASCD Outstanding Young Educator Award is an education professional, 40 years of age or younger, who demonstrates exemplary commitment to the profession. Fall nominations close Oct. 15. Please [nominate](#) a colleague today! (Sept. 27)

[The Mind Trust](#), an Indianapolis-based nonprofit that supports education entrepreneurship, is initiating the Education Entrepreneur Fellowship program, which will provide talented people with the opportunity to develop and launch initiatives to transform public education. An inaugural cohort of four entrepreneurs will begin their two-year fellowships next spring and receive salary, benefits, travel resources, and a customized package of support to develop and launch their proposed ventures. Applications, which include a statement of intent, are due by Jan. 15, 2008. Fellowships will be awarded by May 1, 2008. (Sept. 27)

[Cisco Systems](#), a network solutions provider, and [mtvU](#), a television and Internet network designed for college students, have chosen the recipients of the 2007 [Digital Incubator](#) grants. The annual grant program aims to mobilize new technology innovators by offering college students up to \$250,000 in grants and a national platform for their creations. (Sept. 7)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

The Denver-based Education Commission of the States (ECS) has launched what it bills as a single source for "who's saying what" about renewing NCLB. The [database](#) includes the recommendations of 15 national organizations regarding issues such as Adequate Yearly Progress, high schools, teacher quality, and data systems and reporting. (Sept. 5)

Raising Student Achievement

As NASA plans to return to the moon, plant growth will be an important part of space exploration. NASA scientists anticipate that astronauts may be able to grow plants on the moon in specialized plant growth chambers. Through the NASA Engineering Design Challenge, elementary, middle and high school students will design, build, and evaluate lunar plant growth chambers; receive cinnamon basil seeds flown on STS-118; and test lunar growth chambers by growing and comparing both space-flown and earth-based control seeds. [Register](#) to receive more information about the NASA Engineering Design Challenge. (Ongoing)

The 120,000 students who did not graduate from California's high schools in 2007 will cost the state about \$46.4 billion over the course of their lifetimes, according to a new brief by the [California Dropout Research Project](#) (CDRP). The brief finds that the costs associated with dropouts stem from lost tax revenue, higher medical costs, and the increased likelihood of a dropout being on welfare or committing a crime, compared to individuals who receive a high school diploma. (Aug. 22)

Less earning power means high school dropouts cost a seven-county Milwaukee, Wis. area \$1.5 billion a year, according to a new [report](#). David J. Ward, founder and president of NorthStar Economics, Inc. prepared the report for the Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance, an advocacy group representing 33 school districts in the seven counties. Together, the public schools of southeastern Wisconsin have a regional economic impact nearly as big as the University of Wisconsin-Madison. (Aug. 29)

The College Board has released the *2007 College-Bound Seniors Total Group Profile Report*. Included in the [report](#) are SAT Reasoning Test data, SAT Subject Tests data, demographic and academic information, and college plans. Secretary Spellings released a statement regarding the class of 2007 SAT scores, noting, "The ... scores ... reaffirm the need for greater accountability and increased rigor in our nation's high schools in order to prepare students for college and the workforce." (2007)

Reading

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), in partnership with XM Radio, [announced](#) the launch of *The Big Read* on XM, a radio series based on the NEA's nationwide initiative to revitalize the role of reading in American public culture. First Lady Laura Bush appeared on the premiere episode of the satellite radio [series](#) to discuss the importance of literacy, the National Book Festival, and *The Big Read*. The initiative's federal partner is the Institute of Museum and Library Services. (Sept. 6)

Teacher Quality and Development

The [Association for Childhood Education International](#) (ACEI) has designated Sept. 30 – Oct. 6 as a special week to recognize educators and has joined with over 100 countries in recognizing "World Teachers' Day." ACEI offers free materials to help communities plan celebrations for the "Week of the Classroom Teacher" and World Teachers' Day. Planning guides filled with sample bookmarks, certificates, thank-you notes, and sample announcement letters can be found [online](#). (Sept. 27)

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Charter Schools

A new charter school in Milwaukee is combining the abilities-based educational model of internationally recognized Alverno College with the Cristo Rey high school student employment model. Named Carmen, which is an acronym of the names of several world-renowned Hispanic leaders from the arts, sciences, and politics, the school is beginning with 80 students in the 9th and 10th grades, and will expand to 12th grade in the future. [More—[Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#)] (Sept. 10)

An elementary school in Chicago is taking on Wall Street to test an intriguing proposition: Can teaching urban minority students finance and economics help some of them escape poverty — and shake skepticism among some African-Americans about Wall Street? [More—[Time, Inc.](#)] (Sept. 7)

Achievement First, which runs the Amistad Academy in New Haven, Conn., one of seven charter schools recognized in *K-8 Charter Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap* (see this month's feature), has won approval to open a K-8 charter school in Hartford. [More—[Achievement First.org](#)] (Sept. 6)

In the two years since Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, the city has evolved to have the highest percentage of students in charter schools in the U.S. Principals and teachers from across the nation have come to the city to help run charter schools targeted at helping struggling New Orleans students catch up. Many people believe the city is now the nation's proving ground for charter schools in urban areas. [More— [Christian Science Monitor](#)] (Sept. 4)

Early Childhood

More than a dozen states have agreed to spend more on early childhood education, and research illustrates the effectiveness of such programs. Nearly 1 million children now attend state-funded preschool, up more than 30 percent in five years, according to advocacy group Pre-K Now. [More— [Pre-K Now.org](#)] (Sept. 5)

Children who watch TV more than two hours daily developed 40 percent more attention problems, according to a long-term study of more than 1,000 New Zealand children published in the journal *Pediatrics*. [More—[Scientific American/Reuters](#)] (Sept. 4)

Raising Student Achievement

While school districts in the South lag behind the national average on standardized-test scores and other measures of student achievement, "hundreds of Southern high schools, many still under desegregation orders, have quietly become educational powerhouses, muscling out California, the Midwest, and New England when it comes to school innovation, excellence, and standard-setting." This year, for instance, the top five schools in *Newsweek's* ranking of U.S. public high schools are below the Mason-Dixon line. According to University of Michigan's Maris Vinovskis, such Southern schools "demonstrate that under adverse conditions...schools can thrive." [More— [Christian Science Monitor](#)] (Sept. 11)

A composition teacher claims that when students know their writing is posted for the world to see, their work improves markedly. He posts students' writing on their blogs, which he requires students to create and maintain. [More—[Christian Science Monitor](#)] (Sept.10)

A top math teacher found that the best way to teach her students was to show, not tell. She said that if you create an environment where students aren't afraid to take risks with learning, they will achieve. [More— [Philadelphia Inquirer](#)] (Sept. 5)

Many schools across the nation are changing the traditional school calendar in favor of one that offers a shorter summer break and more time off during the school year. Existing research shows that this change in the calendar may improve student achievement. [More— [Washington Post](#)] (Sept. 2) (*free subscription required*)

There are a growing number of single-gender classrooms in public schools. Since the U.S. Department of Education issued new, less restrictive rules on gender equality last year, interest in separating the sexes as a way to improve test scores has spiked. [More—[Atlanta Journal](#)] (Sept. 2) (*free registration required*)

The [National Math and Science Initiative](#), with support from ExxonMobil Corp., the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, is supporting efforts in seven states to increase offerings of advanced-placement courses in math and science in the states' high schools. According to the *Dallas Morning News*, ExxonMobil's plan to contribute \$125 million to this initiative constitutes the largest charitable contribution in the oil company's history. [More— [Dallas Morning News](#)] (Aug. 30)

Continuing to study material after students think they've learned it may help in the short term, but does little for long-term retention, according to a study published in the August issue of *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. The study also found cramming material into single study sessions reduces long-term retention. [More—[ScienceDaily](#)] (Aug. 29)

Teacher Quality and Development

Wichita State University's (WSU) Transition to Teaching program expects to recruit and train more than 500 new teachers in the next five years, thanks to a \$6.8 million Transition to Teaching grant from the U. S. Department of Education. As part of the new grant activities, WSU will assist other colleges in Kansas, including Pittsburg State University and Fort Hays State University, to adapt its alternative-certification model. [More– [Wichita Eagle](#)] (Sept. 11)

In Washington, D.C., the Center for Inspired Teaching's mission is to "improve student achievement by concentrating on the development of teachers, keeping new teachers excited about their profession and reinvigorating veterans through intensive training." [More– [Washington Post](#)] (Sept.10) (*free registration required*)

A mentorship by a top educator helped a fledging Philadelphia area teacher not only survive her first year of teaching, but experience an outstanding year, for her and her fifth graders at the Fidler Academics Plus school in Germantown, Pa. More than 90 percent of the students scored proficient and advanced in math and more than 60 percent in reading in state tests given last March. [More– [Philadelphia Inquirer](#)] (Sept.10)

Technology

Virtual schools in at least three states—Florida, Missouri, and Utah—were in the news as the school year began. Florida Virtual School, whose motto is "Any Time, Any Place, Any Path, Any Pace," is one of the oldest and largest online schools with more than 55,000 students in Florida and around the world. By launching its own virtual school for students in both high school and K-3, the St. Louis school district hopes to provide "new learning options and attract families who may have left the district," since students in more than 12 area districts are eligible to attend. In Utah, the State Board of Education approved a K-12 virtual school under the management of K12 Inc. While the board was divided in its support for the new statewide school, some members felt that it "offers a reputable curriculum and another choice for students." [More– [AP/ksdk.com](#)] (Sept. 6); [The [Salt Lake Tribune](#)] (Sept. 11)

As text messaging nears its 15-year anniversary, teachers are increasingly seeing abbreviations creep into school work. "As I watch students texting, I see them routinely using abbreviations to the point that they do not know how to spell the word correctly," said now retired high school English teacher Ruth Maenpaa, who also says teens accustomed to texting may struggle to compose longer essays. [More– [USA TODAY](#)] (Sept. 4)

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