

# SCHOOLS

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**ACTIVE AUTHOR:** Shepard Magnet Middle School teacher Daniel Berenson listens to students as they act out one of the lessons in his story — "Can't I Do Anything Wrong?" — during class on Wednesday. Berenson uses his own works to teach his students, and other schools have expressed interest in using them too.

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## Teacher's stories reach kids

Students, other educators request more of his works

By ROBIN L. REALE  
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After reading several books by his language arts teacher, sixth-grader Shariyar Zarea has developed a new interest in the written word and in discussing personal issues with his mom and dad.

"This is the age kids start to shut down on parents, especially boys," Janet Zarea said of her 10-year-old son, who attends Durham's Shepard Magnet Middle School. "But these books have given us an avenue to talk about topics in a neutral setting, like a first kiss. It's been really good."

The author responsible is Daniel Berenson, whose stories are required reading for his students in grades six through eight.

From historical fiction to comedy to psychological drama, the adventures he manufactures have parents and their children giving rave reviews.

"It's weird because you just think of your teacher as a person you learn things from, not someone who writes literature and stuff," said Ryan Shaffer, a sixth-grader. "But he's just like us. He writes stuff we can understand."

Berenson has his students read a chapter at a time, then assigns a writing exercise. Students might predict what the protagonist does in the next chapter, or advise characters on what actions to take.

Teachers from several of the

district's elementary and middle schools have requested copies of his books as teaching tools, so Berenson is applying for a grant to make enough copies to go around and to develop a teaching guide.

"Some students even came to me last week and were begging to have copies made of other works he had done so they could be available to everybody," said Shepard Principal Julia Fairley. "Students really need to see teachers in a different light, that they are bright people with talents they often hide away at home."

The 49-year-old Berenson has produced 11 books since he started writing during winter break in 1989. He didn't have plans for the holidays that year, so he borrowed a computer from Githens Middle School, where he worked at the time, and vowed to start a book.

"My name is Willie and I want to be famous," he began, and subsequently turned out 43 pages. About 15 of those pages have survived rewrites through the years.

Although none of his books have been published yet and he just lost his agent, Berenson said the reaction his students have to his stories convinces him he has something that could be well-received on a national scale.

"Especially with the funny books and with boys, they just go berserk," he said. "Then I think, 'Gosh, I didn't know it was this good.' But it has to be. Kids don't



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**READING TEACHER'S WORDS:** Shepard Magnet Middle School student Mindy Yang reads from teacher Daniel Berenson's story — "Can't I Do Anything Wrong?" — during class.

read a book as a favor, and they're going out and reading them on their own."

Students in one class last week, after bragging to each other about the number of their teacher's works they read for pleasure, enthusiastically participated in a discussion on their next assigned book: "Can't I Do Anything Wrong?"

Berenson asked them to guess what punishable scheme one of his main characters would employ to win the heart of a female classmate.

"Their ideas are great — sick stuff," Berenson said later.

The students suggested giving the class parrot Alka Seltzer to make it explode, mooning the teacher, shooting spitballs at the teacher and starting a food fight, among other things.

Every negative action the char-

acter takes, of course, backfires into a humorous predicament instead of attracting the object of his desire.

Inspiration for the plot came from an incident at Githens years ago, when a student smoked a cigarette in front of the office for attention but succeeded only in making himself sick because no one was around to catch him.

Berenson said he knew he should incorporate the incident into a book as soon as a former colleague told him about it.

And his students have reacted well. They nearly topple over each other for the chance to talk about Berenson's work.

"You're always trying to meet the author," said Brian Wilkerson, another sixth-grader. "Then when you get the chance, he's your teacher. It's sort of weird and cool at the same time."