

Publication: Jnl Final Edition 8/2005-today; Date: Aug 22, 2008; Section: Editorials; Page: A8



In This Indian Charter School, Paternalism Is Paying Off

GEORGE WILL Syndicated Columnist

OAKLAND, Calif. — Seated at a solitary desk in the hall outside a classroom, the slender 13-year-old boy with a smile like a sunrise earnestly does remedial algebra, assisted by a paid tutor. She, too, is 13. Both wear the uniform — white polo shirt, khaki slacks — of a school that has not yet admitted the boy. It will, because he refuses to go away.

The son of Indian immigrants from Mexico, the boy decided he is going to be a doctor, heard about the American Indian Public Charter School here and started showing up. Ben Chavis, AIPCS' benevolent dictator, told the boy that although he was doing well at school, he was not up to the rigors of AIPCS, which is decorated with photographs of the many students it has sent to the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth. So the boy asked, what must I do?

Telling young people what they must do is what Chavis does. With close-cropped hair and a short beard flecked with gray, he looks somewhat like Lenin, but is less democratic. A Lumbee Indian from North Carolina, he ran track, earned a Ph.D. from the University of Arizona, got rich in real estate ("I wanted to buy back America and lease it to the whites") and decided to fix the world, beginning with AIPCS.

Founded in 1996, it swiftly became a multiculturalists' playground where much was tolerated and little was learned. Chavis arrived in 2000 to reverse that condition. Charter schools are not unionized, so he could trim the dead wood, which included all but one staff member.

David Whitman, in his book "Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism," reports that in Chicago, from 2003 through 2006, just three of every 1,000 teachers received an "unsatisfactory" rating in annual evaluations; in 87 "failing schools" — with below average and declining test scores — 69 had no teachers rated unsatisfactory; in all of Chicago, just nine teachers received more than one unsatisfactory rating and none of them was dismissed. Chavis' teachers come from places such as Harvard, Dartmouth, Oberlin, Columbia, Berkeley, Brown and Wesleyan.

AIPCS is one of six highly prescriptive schools Whitman studied, where "noncognitive skills" — responsible behaviors such as self-discipline and cooperativeness — are part of the cultural capital the curriculum delivers. Many inner-city schools feature a monotonous chaos of disruption. AIPCS — Oakland's highest performing middle school — stresses obligation, not self-expression. Chavis, now "administrator emeritus," is adamant: "Everyone says we should 'preserve our culture.' There is a lot of our culture we should wipe out."

A visitor to an AIPCS classroom notices that the children do not notice visitors. Students are taught to sit properly — no slumping — and keep their eyes on the teacher. No makeup, no jewelry, no electronic devices. AIPCS' 200 pupils take just 20 minutes for lunch and are with the same teacher in the same classroom all day. Rotating would consume at least 10 minutes, seven times a day. Seventy minutes a day in AIPCS' extra-long 196-day school year would be a lot of lost instruction. The school does not close for Columbus Day, Martin Luther King Day or Cesar Chavez Day.

Every student takes four pre-AP (advanced placement) classes. There are three weeks of summer math instruction, three hours of homework a night. Seventh-graders take the SAT. College is assumed.

Paternalism is the restriction of freedom for the good of the person restricted. AIPCS acts in loco parentis because Chavis, who is cool toward parental involvement, wants an enveloping school culture that combats the culture of poverty and the streets.

He and other practitioners of the new paternalism — once upon a time, schooling was understood as democracy's permissible, indeed obligatory, paternalism — are proving that cultural pessimists are mistaken: We know how to close the achievement gap that often separates minorities from whites before kindergarten and widens through high school. A growing cohort of people possess the pedagogic skills to make “no excuses” schools flourish.

Unfortunately, powerful factions fiercely oppose the flourishing. Among them are education schools with their romantic progressivism — teachers should be mere “enablers” of group learning; self-esteem is a prerequisite for accomplishment, not a consequence thereof. Other opponents are the teachers' unions and their handmaiden, the Democratic Party. Today's liberals favor paternalism — you cannot eat trans fats; you must buy health insurance — for everyone except children. Odd.

E-mail: georgewill@washpost.com; copyright, Washington Post Writers Group

