

## CHAPTER 3

# Equal Opportunity: Preparing Urban Youth for College

*Paul T. Hill*

An advertisement on the San Francisco Bay Area Craigslist<sup>1</sup> website reads:

*Want to teach some of the smartest kids in California? \$45,500 with full benefits and bonuses.*

*American Indian Public Charter School & American Indian Public High School are seeking self-contained middle and high school classroom teachers for the 2008-09 school year (report to work June 9, 2008).*

*No previous teaching experience required; we simply want smart, enthusiastic, and motivated individuals to push our students to new academic heights. Recent college graduates (including those graduating this May or June) are encouraged to apply.*

*Applicants with strong math backgrounds are especially desirable. Multicultural specialist and self-esteem experts need not apply; we require & reward hard work from our faculty & students, regardless of their backgrounds.*

*Submit resume, cover letter, and transcripts (official or unofficial) via fax or e-mail. We are hiring immediately!*

This posting comes from a charter school—a demanding middle school aiming to get students started on the right foot for college, but a school that is not reserved for children of the elite but for inner-city, low-income minority students.

## PORTRAIT OF A SCHOOL

Oakland's American Indian Public Charter School (AIPCS) has the assertive, no-nonsense tone that its Craigslist ad projects. And this unusual ad attracts the teachers that AIPCS's leaders want: Graduates of elite colleges, many in their late 20s, with science or mathematics backgrounds who, while they lack certification, have a passion for teaching disadvantaged students. People hired make more money than beginning Oakland public school teachers and work a longer school day, while also being expected to teach classes on Saturday and during mandatory summer school sessions.

Students, dressed in school uniforms, sit packed together in small rooms. Equally divided between boys and girls, the students are a remarkably diverse racial and ethnic stew. They are quiet and attentive. Nobody sleeps or wisecracks. Every seat is full and there are no students in the hall cutting class.

The school's spending priorities are transparent. Most of the money goes for teacher salaries. Textbooks and instructional materials are up to date but they are well cared for and re-used. School head Ben Chavis, a full-blooded Lumbee Indian who made his fortune in business, possesses a Ph.D. and once taught at San Francisco State University. He is unpaid, and the administrative structure of the school is tiny. Extracurricular activities—cross-country and debate—require neither equipment nor extra staff. The Spartan facilities are clean and meet code, but offer no amenities. Chavis ripped out all of the school's computers and created a "library" crammed on to a small stage, supplemented by weekly bookmobile visits. Several classrooms look out on abandoned boarded-up buildings, and students are expected to clean the grounds and bathrooms.

AIPCS is a middle school. Students study a curriculum that would be familiar to graduates of old-fashioned classics-oriented middle and high schools. Teachers stand in front of the class but engage it in rapid-fire question and answer exchanges, turning quickly to the blackboard to demonstrate a tough concept or to show how a new idea links with familiar ones. Teachers use North Carolina math, science, and history books, because Chavis believes California texts are watered down. Every class finishes the assigned

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book. Students get help after school if they are falling behind, but the course material is presented on schedule.

There are few electives so that every student can focus on the math, science, history, and English courses that the school considers gatekeepers to competitive colleges. The school practices tough love, insisting that all students can master demanding coursework, if they focus their time and energies.

The school exercises authority to an end. Its disciplinary methods are controversial. One rule requires students who have not completed homework assignments to sit on the floor during class. Students accept the school's discipline and order. Girls as well as boys also accept Chavis's hard but pointed kidding about their effort and deportment. Chavis is unconcerned that these methods are controversial. He confronts visiting educators who complain about unenlightened methods and posts an abrasive set of "common sense" maxims on the school's website (see sidebar) that makes no secret of the school's contempt for what Chavis perceives to be the outlook and values of mainstream educators and educational theorists.

There are no vacancies at the school. Hispanic, Asian, and African American parents who are determined to have their children succeed and get into college lobby to get their children into the school and put up with its many demands on students' time. Parents, most of whom are single mothers or grandmothers, may visit the school, but they are not welcome to fret about workload or deportment standards.

Ironically, the school's strong academic reputation makes it difficult to keep the American Indian students who enroll, because academically prepared Native Americans get offered free rides at prestigious private schools. In 2007, the school posted the highest test scores of any school in Oakland. Its scores also bested Piedmont Middle School, a private school in a ritzy Oakland suburb with mostly white and Asian students. AIPCS's fledgling high school for ninth and tenth graders outscored storied Lowell High in San Francisco, generally considered to be one of the top high schools in the United States.

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## COMMON SENSE & USEFUL LEARNING AT AIPCS

*Dr. Ben Chavis*

1. The school facility is open daily from 8:30am until 4:00pm, except Saturdays, Sundays, and all holidays known to mankind.
2. The staff of AIPCS does not preach or subscribe to the demagoguery of tolerance. Anyone who does not follow our rules will be sent packing with their rags and bags!
3. Squawkers, multicultural specialists, self-esteem experts, panhandlers, drug dealers, and those snapping turtles who refuse to put forth their best effort will be booted out.
4. Boot-licking or self-promoting is not allowed by any politician who enters our classrooms. Politicians should beware: teachers are on duty!
5. We do not believe standardized tests discriminate against students because of their color. Could it be many of them have not been adequately prepared to take those tests?
6. The staff does not allow students to wear hats, gold chains, or ear-bobs in the building. Adults are not allowed to use cell phones, beepers, and other gadgets in our school.
7. Dr. Chavis does provide psychological evaluations to quacks and Kultur specialists on a sliding scale. See him immediately for such rates.
8. All solicitors should note the nearest exit upon entering this institution of learning. We view such alley cats with a fishy eye.
9. No more than one psychologist or school administrator is allowed in our school at a time. This rule is part of our commitment to high academic standards.
10. Photographs of the Director of Staff are on sale at the front office. Payment must be made in advance. CASH ONLY! The photographs will be sent to you by pony express.
11. The staff of AIPCS is of the first rank. We request that you do not flirt with them. They will accept your cash donations!
12. Visitors are welcome daily. Due to the time it takes to re-educate university visitors, we are limiting their number to a maximum of four individuals a week.
13. It will be difficult for our staff to meet with those educational experts who "know it all." We are willing to meet with such tomcats on Halloween night.
14. How does anyone convince a Billy goat or taxpayer that school administrators possess above average intelligence? How will we address this educational dilemma?
15. Our staff does not subscribe to the back swamp logic of minority students as victims. We will plow through such cornfield philosophy with common sense and hard work!
16. If you wish to share any suggestions regarding this page, our common sense committee accepts suggestions from 8:30am to 8:31am each holiday.

SOURCE: <http://www.aipcs.org/CommonSense.html>.

## A TREND

The National Charter School Research Project's *Inside Charter Schools* (ICS) initiative includes case studies of eleven charter high schools, four of which have a clear college-prep focus. News accounts suggest such schools are emerging in many big cities. Not all the college-prep charter schools that ICS visited are as flamboyantly led as the American Indian Public Charter School, or as traditional in their approaches to student and teacher roles. But they have a lot in common.<sup>2</sup>

Although they differ in many particulars, the new college-prep charter schools resemble urban Catholic high schools that offered a route to assimilation and economic mobility for Irish and Italian immigrants in the 20th century. These new schools are authoritative, demanding a lot while assuring students that meeting the school's demands will lead to new opportunities and success. School leaders justify rules in terms of their practical consequences for students, a set of attitudes closely related to what David Whitman calls "the new paternalism," the conviction that adults know more than students, educational staff know more than parents, and strong relationships involving obligations and demands need to be built between students and faculty.

Each school has, in its own way:

**A DEMANDING INTELLECTUAL CLIMATE** built around university preparatory material and the expectation that students will write and speak in ways that competitive colleges take for granted. Unlike urban public schools that teach watered-down math, science, and literature,<sup>3</sup> and track less capable students into vocational courses, these schools teach what college-bound students are expected to know. Students often struggle, due to weak elementary school preparation, but they are motivated by the fact that the material they must learn is rich and interesting.

**A CENTRIPETAL CURRICULUM**, especially in high school, one that pulls all students toward mastery of key subjects. This is done by limiting the schools' course offerings and by making sure students who struggle with the material get extra help outside school hours, rather than missing core instruction.

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**CLOSE ATTENTION TO THE PROGRESS OF INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS, INCLUDING FREQUENT TESTING**, so that nobody falls far behind. Though some schools use technology (for example, databases informed by frequent testing), most rely on teacher effort. Staff meetings are used to identify students in trouble and make sure all teachers are working in the same direction.

**COORDINATION AMONG TEACHERS** to ensure that students learn what they need in one area (for example, mathematics) to do work assigned elsewhere (for example, science) and that teachers in all courses know what students have learned previously.

**A STRONGLY MANAGED SCHOOL CLIMATE** to protect students from distraction and minimize the amount of time and energy teachers devote to keeping order. Applicants to the school are told about expectations for student behavior and effort. Every adult in the school upholds the same standards, and older students are expected to act as models for younger ones.

**OVERT BICULTURALISM**, so that students learn the behavioral codes associated with higher education and professional work, while continuing to value their heritages and home languages. Like the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), many of the schools that ICS visited formally teach rules for adult interaction—for example, sit facing the other person and look at him or her; nod to show you are listening; respond in full sentences. One school teaches golf and sponsors a field hockey team to compete with area prep schools.

**VALIDATION OF THE SCHOOL'S EFFECTIVENESS** by connecting students with graduates who are succeeding in high schools or competitive colleges. Schools celebrate college admission, for example, by posting pennants from schools that graduates will attend, or encouraging cheers for graduating seniors who come to school wearing their college sweatshirts. AIPCS also publicizes its results on all California tests and enters students in debate competitions.

The college prep charter schools that ICS visited have a lot in common but they are not all the same. Some target one ethnic group (Hispanics in Southern California and the Bay Area, African Americans connected to a church-based community develop-

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ment agency in Texas), while others attract a more ethnically diverse population of low-income or minority students from a large under-served area.

The college-prep charter schools studied also aggressively socialize their students to prepare them for entry into universities and the professions. The schools' methods vary, however. Some use chanting and communal events in ways reminiscent of KIPP. Others are more didactic, teaching ethics and holding group discussions on what Ted Sizer would call "essential questions." All put strong pressure on their teachers and administrators to adhere to school values in their own transactions with students and outside lives.

Though all these schools make sure students graduate with transcripts full of college prep courses, and prepare students for the SAT or ACT, they use a variety of teaching methods. Most of the charter schools visited make aggressive use of online materials; many spend time on project-based learning. Some place students in part-time white-collar jobs, so they can see firsthand the kind of work and life opportunities a college degree can bring.

No other charter school visited offered such high beginning teacher salaries or provided as austere an environment as the American Indian Public Charter School. Nor were they all as dismissive of traditional teacher certification. One California school is staffed by teachers from an elite university college of education—individuals who place great value on their own autonomy and the uniqueness of their classrooms.

However, all of these schools use the end goal of college admission as their guiding star. They orient student work on that goal and put course requirements and test preparation (as necessary) in that context. Managers of a coalition of four such schools in the Los Angeles area admit that their approach to instruction is evolving from progressive to standardized, as they learn what it takes to overcome immigrant and low-income students' educational disadvantages.

For those familiar with research on schools that are effective with poor and minority students, these attributes should be no surprise. At this level of generality the college prep charter schools offer students an experience very much like that of the Catholic schools studied by Coleman,<sup>4</sup> Bryk,<sup>5</sup> Hill,<sup>6</sup> and Irvine.<sup>7</sup> The common theme of all those studies was that schools offering supportive communities, demanding instruction, indi-

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vidual attention, and strong moral guidance are highly effective for low-income minority youth.

As Irvine concludes, schools must respect students' backgrounds, but they can also help students become members of broader communities with universal middle-class values. It is done by showing students that they have choices about how to act and where to direct effort, and by demonstrating that learning is possible, satisfying, and ultimately rewarding. Other schools not included in Irvine's study, including KIPP and the religiously themed Cristo Rey, have demonstrated the power of similar methods.

Schools like this are not for everybody. Academic demands are unrelenting, and a student who skips school or tunes out has no chance to succeed. Behavioral demands are too much for students who prefer the loose discipline prevalent in public schools. Children of university-educated professionals might not need the controlling environment or highly structured curriculum these schools offer, but many of these students do.

Such schools can transform students. Focus groups with high school students who transferred from unfocused and unruly schools reveal that these students admit to calibrating their work effort and behavior to what they saw other students doing, and therefore to what the school accepted as normal.

The schools described above are not for all educators either. But these schools have no trouble finding capable principals and instructors, including teachers trained in schools of education and teachers from alternative sources like Teach for America, who believe that thousands of capable young people are lost every year for want of an intellectually demanding environment.

## WHAT CHARTERING CONTRIBUTES

There is little new about these schools. They provide a very familiar and well-proven form of education, and they provide students with the kinds of familial supports and middle-class role models that once made Catholic schools so important to poor European immigrants. But they are making it available to students for whom it was not previously available. Catholic schools' small size and high costs (and their dwindling numbers) strictly limit the numbers of students who can attend. Some districts offer a few good magnet schools that have been over-subscribed for decades.

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Reluctant to create competitors for their large comprehensive high schools and facing little pressure that low-income students will move to private schools or the suburbs, districts have ignored a real demand. Charters open a new supply route. Without chartering, these students, and the teachers and administrators that make the schools work, would not have the same opportunities.

The schools studied here were not lavishly spending foundation money. Most operated on the state funding provided charter schools. The American Indian Public Charter School now has funds from one relatively small foundation, one that was too tough to be frightened off by Ben Chavis' declaration, "We don't want your money!" All, however, get invaluable volunteer help from school heads, churches, or neighborhood associations.

College-prep charter schools for disadvantaged students are not easy to build or keep in operation. Principals and teachers must themselves be in command of difficult subject matter. They must also be dedicated to bringing students up to the same level. Adults who are accomplished in these ways have many other job options, and schools must constantly struggle to keep or replace them.

Among the schools studied, those most open to experimentation and teacher autonomy struggled to make sure courses fit together and students' experience accumulated over time. Schools that provide a more uniform program, like AIPCS, might be more stable and coherent in the short run, but will be gravely challenged when their founders leave.

Of all the necessary ingredients of a college-prep charter school, willing parents are the easiest to find. There is obviously an unmet demand for schools that value intellectual attainment and lead students to value hard intellectual work. Public school districts seem content to offer one or a few such schools, and to assume, regardless of whether they are oversubscribed, that enough is enough. Chartering opens up public education to new providers, and lets the supply of schools respond to demand.

The schools described here are relatively new, and they have not been subjected to the kind of formal evaluation that can assess their effectiveness, controlling for student characteristics and other factors. It seems clear, however, that parents and students believe these schools are working and that students are learning differently, compared to their experience in district-run middle schools. Parents also believe their children have valuable new opportunities.

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Popular as they are with families, there really are not enough of these schools. They are hard to set up—absent a charter framework. They require powerful leaders, who may be in short supply. They also require dedicated teachers, many of whom might prefer the security of traditional schools. They may also affront the sensibilities of educators who believe every public school should be broad and comprehensive. They may also be no-win solutions to district administrators worried in a top-down accountability environment about the effects of encouraging schools to set their own schedules and purchase their own instructional materials. Teachers union leaders (with the possible exception of the American Federation of Teachers) are unlikely to sit by idly while very young teachers get paid above official pay scales to lead larger classes and work longer hours.

School leaders like Ben Chavis are not above rubbing salt in the wounds of people who feel affronted, offended, or worried. Antagonism is likely to continue, at least in some communities. However, as long as chartering is legal, schools fulfill the terms of their charters, and government agencies tasked with overseeing charters do their jobs, more such schools are likely to emerge.

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## NOTES

1. [Http://sfbay.craigslist.org/](http://sfbay.craigslist.org/).
2. For a much more extensive analysis of college-prep charter schools, done independently of the ICS study but reaching similar results, see David Whitman, *Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2008).
3. See Jeannie Oakes, Molly Selvin, Lynn A. Karoly, and Gretchen Guito, *Educational Matchmaking: Academic and Vocational Tracking in Comprehensive High Schools* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1992).
4. James S. Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore, *High School Achievement: Public, Catholic and Private Schools Compared* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).
5. Anthony S. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, et al., *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).
6. Paul T. Hill, Gail Foster, and Tamar Gendler, *High Schools with Character* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1990).
7. Jacqueline Jordan Irvine and Michele Foster, eds. *Growing Up African American in Catholic Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996).