



# An Appeal to Authority

## The new paternalism in urban schools

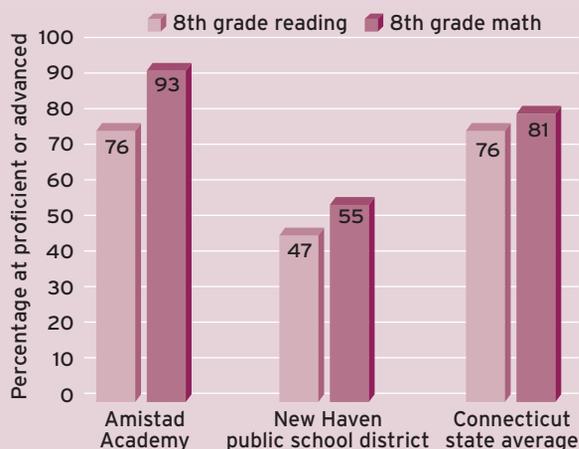
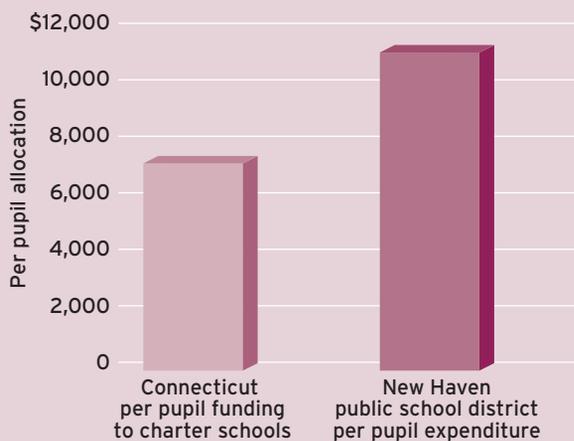
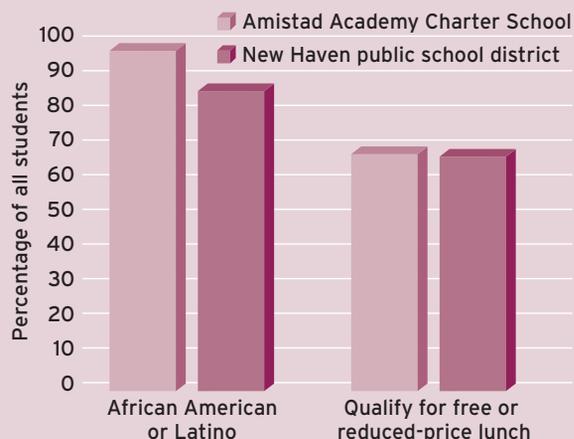
**By the time youngsters reach high school in the United States,** the achievement gap is immense. The average black 12th grader has the reading and writing skills of a typical white 8th grader and the math skills of a typical white 7th grader. The gap between white and Hispanic students is similar. But some remarkable inner-city schools are showing that the achievement gap can be closed, even at the middle and high school level, if poor minority kids are given the right kind of instruction.

Over the past two years, I have visited six outstanding schools. (For a list of schools, see sidebar, page 55.) All of these educational gems enroll minority youngsters from rough urban neighborhoods with initially poor to mediocre academic skills; all but one are open-admission schools that admit students mostly by lottery. Their middle school students perform as well as their white peers, and in some middle schools, minority students learn at a rate comparable to that of affluent white students in their state's top schools. (For one impressive example, see Figure 1.) At the high school level, low-income minority students are more likely to matriculate to college than their more advantaged peers, with more than 95 percent of graduates gaining admission to college. Not surprisingly, they all have gifted, deeply committed teachers and dedicated, forceful principals. They also have rigorous academic standards, test students frequently, and carefully monitor students' academic performance to assess where students need help. "Accountability," for both teachers and students, is not a loaded code word but a lodestar. Students take a college-prep curriculum and are not tracked into vocational or noncollege-bound classes. Most of the schools have uniforms or a dress code, an extended school day, and three weeks of summer school.

BY DAVID WHITMAN

## Challenging Demographics... Less Money... Higher Scores (Figure 1)

Although 98 percent of Amistad's students are minority, two-thirds of them come from low-income families, and the school receives less per-pupil funding than district schools, the charter school's 8th-grade students far outperformed district students in reading and math on Connecticut's Mastery Test in 2006-7.



SOURCES: www.achievementfirst.org; Connecticut State Department of Education, CMT Assessment Data website

Yet above all, these schools share a trait that has been largely ignored by education researchers: They are *paternalistic* institutions. By paternalistic I mean that each of the six schools is a highly prescriptive institution that teaches students not just how to think, but also how to act according to what are commonly termed traditional, middle-class values. These paternalistic schools go beyond just teaching values as abstractions: the schools tell students exactly how they are expected to behave, and their behavior is closely monitored, with real rewards for compliance and penalties for noncompliance. Unlike the often-forbidding paternalistic institutions of the past, these schools are prescriptive yet warm; teachers and principals, who sometimes serve in loco parentis, are both authoritative and caring figures. Teachers laugh with and cajole students, in addition to frequently directing them to stay on task.

The new breed of paternalistic schools appears to be the single most effective way of closing the achievement gap. No other school model or policy reform in urban secondary schools seems to come close to having such a dramatic impact on the performance of inner-city students. Done right, paternalistic schooling provides a novel way to remake inner-city education in the years ahead.

But while these “no excuses” schools have demonstrated remarkable results, the notion of reintroducing paternalism in inner-city schools is deeply at odds with the conventional wisdom of the K-12 education establishment. For a host of reasons, teachers unions, school board members, ed school professors, big-city school administrators, multicultural activists, bilingual educators, and progressive-education proponents do not embrace the idea that what might most help disadvantaged students are highly prescriptive schools that favor traditional instructional methods. And even the many parents who are foursquare in favor of what paternalistic schools do cringe at labeling the schools in those terms. In 2008, “paternalism” remains a dirty word in American culture.

### Paternalism Reborn

What is paternalism and why does it have so few friends? Webster's defines paternalism as a principle or system of governing that echoes a father's relationship with his children. Paternalistic policies interfere with the freedom of individuals, and this interference is justified by the argument that the individuals will be better off as a result. Paternalism is controversial because it contains an element of moral arrogance, an assertion of superior competence. But in the last decade, government paternalism has enjoyed a kind of rebirth.

In a 1997 volume titled *The New Paternalism*, New York University professor Lawrence Mead, the leading revisionist, explored the emergence of a new breed of paternalistic policies aimed at reducing poverty, welfare dependency, and other social problems by closely supervising the poor. These

paternalistic programs try to curb social problems by imposing behavioral requirements for assistance and then monitoring recipients to ensure compliance. “Misbehavior is not just punished” in paternalistic programs, writes Mead. “It is preempted by the oversight of authority figures, much as parents supervise their families.” The schools I visited are paternalistic in the very way Mead describes.

Paternalistic programs survive only because they typically enforce values that “clients already believe,” Mead notes. But many paternalistic programs remain controversial because they seek to change the lifestyles of the poor, immigrants, and minorities, rather than the lifestyles of middle-class and upper-class families. The paternalistic presumption implicit in the schools is that the poor lack the family and community support, cultural capital, and personal follow-through to live according to the middle-class values that they, too, espouse.

In the narrowest sense, all American schools are paternalistic. “Schooling virtually defines what paternalism means in a democratic society,” the political scientist James Q. Wilson has written. Elementary schools often attempt to teach values and enforce rules about how students are to behave and treat others. The truth is that hundreds of parochial and traditional public schools in the inner city are authoritarian institutions with pronounced paternalistic elements. Yet the new paternalistic schools I visited look and feel very different from these more commonplace institutions.

The most distinctive feature of new paternalistic schools is that they are fixated on curbing disorder. The emphasis springs from an understanding of urban schools that owes much to James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling’s well-known “broken windows” theory of crime reduction: the idea that disorder and even *signs* of disorder (e.g., the broken window left unfixed) are the fatal undoing of urban neighborhoods. That is why these schools devote inordinate attention to making sure that shirts are tucked in, bathrooms are kept clean, students speak politely, and trash is picked up.

Paternalistic schools teach character and middle-class virtues like diligence, politeness, cleanliness,

## Six Effective Urban Schools

American Indian Public Charter School (AIPCS), Oakland, CA  
Amistad Academy, New Haven, CT  
Cristo Rey Jesuit High School, Chicago, IL  
KIPP Academy, Bronx, NY  
SEED School, Washington, DC  
University Park Campus School, Worcester, MA

and thrift. They impose detentions for tardiness and disruptive behavior in class and forbid pupils from cursing at or talking disrespectfully to teachers. But the new paternalistic schools go further than even strict Catholic schools in prescribing student conduct and minimizing signs of disorder.

Pupils are typically taught not just to walk rather than run in the hallway—they learn *how* to walk from class to class: silently, with a book in hand. In class, teachers constantly monitor whether students are tracking them with their eyes, whether students nod their heads to show that they listening, and if students have slouched in their seats. Amistad Academy enforces a zero-tolerance policy. Calling out in class, distracting other students, rolling your eyes at a teacher—all rather common occurrences in most middle-school classrooms—result in students being sent to a “time out” desk or losing “scholar dollars” from virtual “paychecks” that can be used to earn special privileges at school.

Teachers ceaselessly monitor student conduct and character development to assess if students are acting respectfully, developing self-discipline, displaying good manners, working hard, and taking responsibility for their actions. The SEED school even requires students to have teachers sign a note after each class assessing how the student performed on a list of 12 “responsible behaviors” and 12 “irresponsible behaviors.”

### Culture Change

Paternalistic schools are culturally authoritative schools as well. Their pupils learn—and practice—how to shake hands when they are

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introduced to someone. At SEED and Cristo Rey, students practice sitting down to a formal place setting typical of a restaurant and learn the difference between the dinner fork and the salad fork. The new paternalistic schools thus build up the “cultural capital” of low-income students by taking them to concerts, to Shakespearean plays, on trips to Washington, D.C., and to national parks. They help students find white-collar internships, and teach them how to comport themselves in an office.

One of the distinctive features of Cristo Rey is its novel work-study program, which dispatches students one day a week to clerical jobs in downtown Chicago in accounting firms, banks, insurance companies, law firms, and offices of health-care providers. For the first time in their lives, students are surrounded by white-collar professionals who had to attend college and graduate schools as a prerequisite to landing their jobs.

At the same time that these schools reinforce middle-class mores, they also steadfastly suppress all aspects of street culture. Street slang, the use of the “n-word,” and cursing are typically barred not only in the classroom but in hallways and lunchrooms as well. Merely fraternizing with gang members can lead to expulsion. If students so much as doodle gang graffiti on a notebook or a piece of paper at Cristo Rey, they are suspended. And if they doodle a gang symbol a second time, principal Pat Garrity expels them. The school day and year are extended in part to boost academic achievement, but also to keep kids off the street and out of homes with few academic supports.

The prescriptive rigor and accountability of paternalistic schools extend not just to student character and conduct but to academics as well. AIPCS is one of only two middle schools in Oakland to require every 8th grader—including special ed students—to take algebra I. All KIPP Academy 8th graders complete a two-year high-school-level algebra I course and take the New York State Math A Regents exam, a high school exit exam. In 2006, an astonishing 85 percent passed it.

Paternalistic schools, in short, push *all* students to perform to high standards. They spell out exactly what their pupils are

supposed to learn and then ride herd on them until they master it. From the first day students walk through the door, their principal and teachers envelop them in a college-going ethos, with the goal that 100 percent of students will be admitted into college. Over time, paternalistic schools create a culture of achievement that is the antithesis of street culture.

By their very nature, the new paternalistic schools for teens tend to displace a piece of parents’ traditional role in transmitting values. Most of the schools are founded on the premise that minority parents want to do the right thing but often don’t have the time or resources to keep their children from being dragged down by an unhealthy street culture. But the schools do not presume that boosting parental participation is the key to narrowing the achievement gap. Parents’ chief role at no-excuses schools is

helping to steer their children through the door—paternalistic schools are typically schools of choice—and then ensuring that their children get to school on time.

Principals and teachers at these schools are surprisingly familiar with students’ personal lives. As a result, students call on teachers and principals for advice and help. Teachers are deeply devoted to their students, often answering phone queries from students late into the night, showing up before school starts to help a struggling pupil, or staying late to help tutor. A KIPP student recalls, “I needed help in math in 5th grade and called my teacher one week three times a night.” It is not uncommon for students to describe their schools as a “second home.”

What really makes this a kinder, gentler form of paternalism is that parents, typically single mothers, choose to send their children to these inner-city schools—but they are also acting under duress. They believe their neighborhood schools fail to educate students and are breeding grounds for gang strife and drugs. They are often desperate for alternatives, and are particularly excited to find a no-nonsense public school committed to readying their children for college. In this sense, paternalistic schools draw a self-selected student population. Even so, there is surprisingly little evidence that these schools are “creaming” the best and brightest minority students. At most of these schools, students are

typically one to two grade levels behind their age-level peers when they arrive.

### The Old Educational Paternalism

Twice before in U.S. history paternalism has held sway in schools for low-income or minority students—with very different results. The first major expansion of paternalistic schooling was the Indian boarding schools of the late 19th century, which sought to “civilize” Native Americans. The second major expansion took place when urban schools sought to acculturate the multitudes of European immigrants to American society.

From the start, Indian boarding schools proved controversial and unpopular with many parents. Agents from the Bureau of Indian Affairs rounded up Indian children—often against their parents’ will—to attend the schools. Upon their arrival, children’s hair was cut, Native American garb was replaced with school uniforms, and teachers forbade students to speak in their native tongue, often punishing students who failed to speak in English. Students with exotic or hard-to-pronounce Indian names were abruptly given Anglo surnames. Unlike the paternalistic schools of today, which seek to boost existing values among beleaguered single-parent families, Indian boarding schools sought to *eradicate* local culture and traditions and destroy the parent-child bond.

A more benevolent paternalism was evident early in the 20th century when urban schools took on the task of acculturating millions of Italian, Irish, and Polish immigrant children. Schools tried to “Americanize” impoverished immigrants by teaching them English and acclimating them to the schedules and expectations of city life. Most teachers and school administrators eagerly embraced the role of cultural evangelist. Teachers inspected children’s heads for lice and lectured them about hygiene and nutrition. Students were taught how to speak proper English; Anglicizing of names was common.

The ethos of Americanization was powerful, even within many immigrant slums. Time and again, when cities provided foreign-language instruction, immigrants declined to enroll in classes taught in their native tongue. Schools for immigrant children reinforced values that parents held but alone could not pass on to their children—namely, the desire that their children learn English and become Americans. On the whole, historians have judged the relatively rapid Americanization of millions of poor newcomers to be a qualified success.

In the latter half of the 20th century, paternalistic education largely disappeared from inner-city schools in the United States. For a quarter century after the controversial 1965 Moynihan report on “The Negro Family,” urban school administrators abided by an unwritten gag rule that barred

candid discussion of the impact of ethnic culture and family values on academic performance. A core premise of paternalistic schools—that they can transport students out of poor communities by providing a sustained injection of middle-class values—became politically taboo. Decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court reinforced this trend beginning in the 1970s. By advancing the notion that students have the right to free speech and the right to due-process protections if they are to be suspended or expelled, the Court made it more difficult for principals and teachers to play a morally authoritative role.

### Scaling Up

As Lawrence Mead has pointed out, paternalism is neither conservative nor liberal per se; in some eras of American history, liberals have pressed for paternalistic programs, while at other times conservatives have lobbied for them. At first glance, the character training and rituals of these paternalistic schools give them a decidedly traditional feel. The schools teach old-fashioned virtues, simply put. Yet these virtues—perseverance, discipline, politeness—are really the same as the “noncognitive skills” that liberal education reformers like Richard Rothstein and economists like James Heckman want inner-city schools to boost in order to raise academic achievement and compensate for low-income students’ economic and cultural deficits.

In fact, the founders of many of today’s paternalistic schools are liberals who believe that closing the pernicious achievement gap between white and minority students is the central civil-rights issue of our century. Most of the founders and principals of the schools I visited were uneasy with having their schools described as paternalistic. “I don’t think there is a positive way to say a school is paternalistic,” Eric Adler, cofounder of the SEED School in Washington, D.C., asserted. Dave Levin, cofounder of the network of KIPP schools, shared Adler’s reservations: “To say that a school is paternalistic suggests that we are condescending, rather than serving in the role of additional parents....”

Today’s paternalistic schools are more palatable to liberals than earlier models were because their curricula for character development promote not only traditional virtues but also social activism. SEED, for example, explicitly encourages community involvement in progressive causes, as do KIPP Academy, Cristo Rey, and University Park. SEED requires students to participate in community service projects and teaches each student to “make a commitment to a life of social action.” Students are urged to reflect on their own experiences with prejudice, discrimination, and bullying.

While liberals applaud these schools for placing poor kids on the path toward college (and out of poverty), conservatives cheer them for teaching the work ethic and traditional

virtues. And there is great demand for seats in paternalistic schools among inner-city parents. So why not create lots more of them? Unfortunately, the three legs of the education establishment tripod—teachers unions, the district bureaucracy, and education schools—are all unlikely to embrace key elements that make paternalistic schools work. (See sidebar, for some habits of effective urban schools.)

In paternalistic schools, principals must be able to assemble teams of teachers with a personal commitment to closing the achievement gap, teachers who are willing to work an extended school day and school year, who want to instruct teens about both traditional course matter and character development, and who will make themselves available to students as needed. But requiring teachers to work longer days and years would in most cases violate union contracts. So would allowing principals to handpick teachers (who may or may not be certified) and fire those who are not successful in the classroom. District bureaucrats, meanwhile, are loath to grant individual schools the freedom to do things differently, especially when it comes to curriculum and budget.

It would appear that education schools (and many K–12 educators trained there) bear a special animosity toward paternalism and its instructional incarnations. This is evident in their dislike of teacher-directed instruction, “drill-and-kill” memorization, rote learning, and direct instructional methods that emphasize the importance of acquiring basic facts and skills.

The Romantic educational philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (and his American heir, John Dewey) continues to prevail. Most K–12 educators (and their teachers in ed schools) believe students should be free to explore, to cultivate a love of learning, and to develop their “critical thinking” skills unencumbered by rote learning. By contrast, the new paternalistic schools are animated more by obligation than freedom. Mead argues that “the problem of poverty or underachievement is not that the poor lack freedom. The real problem is that the poor are *too* free.” Paternalistic schools assume that disadvantaged students do best when structure and expectations are crystal clear, rather than presuming that kids should learn to figure things out for themselves.

Were it not for the recalcitrance of the education establishment, a grand bargain might be in the offing: If inner-city schools across the nation successfully adopted a no-excuses model, perhaps conservatives would be willing to support spending increases for longer school days, an extended school year, and additional tutoring. And perhaps liberals would be willing to grant principals and teachers of these schools a great deal of autonomy, allowing these schools to circumvent state and district regulations and union contracts.

## Habits of Highly Effective Urban Schools (abridged)

- 1) Tell students exactly how to behave and tolerate no disorder.
- 2) Require a rigorous, college-prep curriculum.
- 3) Assess students regularly, and use the results to target struggling students and improve instruction.
- 4) Build a collective culture of achievement and college going.
- 5) Reject the culture of the streets.
- 6) Extend the school day and/or year.
- 7) Welcome accountability for teachers and principals and embrace constant reassessment.
- 8) Use unconventional channels to recruit committed teachers.
- 9) Don't demand much from parents.
- 10) Don't waste resources on fancy facilities or technology.

For now, the spread of paternalistic schooling is taking place on a school-by-school basis in dozens of schools, but not on a massive scale. Unlike earlier generations of exemplary inner-city schools, today's paternalistic institutions fortunately follow replicable school models and do not depend heavily on charismatic principals whose leadership cannot be copied elsewhere. The founders of these schools are devoting substantial resources to replicating their flagship schools, but they continue to encounter obstacles both political and practical. The difficulty of funding an extended school day and year, the reluctance of districts to grant autonomy to innovative school leaders, and the flawed charter laws and union contracts that tie the hands of entrepreneurs are just some of the factors that impede the spread of paternalistic reform. These obstacles make the restructuring of inner-city schools en masse in the mold of paternalism unlikely in the near future.

Still, these entrepreneurial school founders battle on, slowly replicating their institutions across the country. It is too soon to say that all of the copycat schools will succeed. But the early results are extremely encouraging. It is possible that these schools, so radically different from traditional public schools, could one day educate not just several thousand inner-city youngsters but tens or even hundreds of thousands of students in cities across the nation. Done well, paternalistic schooling would constitute a major stride toward reducing the achievement gap and the lingering disgrace of racial inequality in urban America.

*David Whitman is a freelance journalist and former senior writer at U.S. News & World Report. This article was adapted from his forthcoming book, Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2008).*