

Educating Urban America

Reviewed by Thomas Toch

IT IS EASY TO FORGET THAT IN 1965 YOUNG African-American men were slightly more likely than their white peers to hold a job. Over the next two decades, as blue-collar work declined with the rise of the information economy, employment rates among black males plummeted. At the same time, middle-class African Americans moved en masse to the suburbs. Together, these trends helped turn America's inner cities into centers of concentrated poverty. Today, the task of educating the mostly African-American and Latino students in urban schools is the nation's toughest educational test.

Many states and the federal government have sought a regulatory solution to the problem: setting universal achievement standards and calling out schools that don't measure up. While this strategy has highlighted the chinks in the nation's educational armor—more than 31,000 of the country's 97,000 public schools currently are required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act to improve their performance—it hasn't yet fixed many failing schools, a fact that's sure to spur debate when the law comes up for renewal this year or next.

Over the past decade, a different, grassroots response to the urban education crisis evolved, as social entrepreneurs bankrolled by hundreds of millions of philanthropy dollars established new types of schools and nonprofit organizations. These ventures have attracted glowing attention from *60 Minutes*, *Nightline*, Oprah Winfrey, and even Prince Charles and Nelson Mandela. Three recent books offer more probing looks at these efforts to crack the code of successful urban schooling. Though they present sympathetic portraits of promising new strategies, these reports are as sobering as they are heartening on the prospects for many deeply disadvantaged students.

In *Sweating the Small Stuff*, David Whitman, who spent nearly two decades covering social policy for *U.S. News and World Report*, profiles in rich detail half a dozen schools that are educating inner-city students under a model that he calls a “new

paternalism,” which attempts to condition students with scant structure at home to the discipline and order required for learning. At KIPP Academy, a middle school in the South Bronx, and Amistad Academy, a New Haven middle school, students must follow a strict code of classroom conduct called SLANT: Sit up, Listen to speakers, Ask and answer questions, Nod to signal that you're following conversation, and Track teachers with your eyes. In a number of the schools Whitman profiles, kids chant and do rhythmic clapping in class and assemblies. Students wear uniforms, and so little as an untucked shirt is censured. At SEED, a public boarding school for seventh through twelfth graders in Washington, D.C., and Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Chicago, students must take etiquette classes, where they learn everything from the difference between a salad fork and a dinner fork to how to blow your nose in public politely.

Skeptics of “new paternalism” may invoke authoritarian parochial schools of the past or, worse, the public “paternalism” that eroded the cultural heritage of Native American students a century ago by packing them off to government boarding schools. But Amistad and similar schools I've visited don't just make rules. They also give their students a lot of individual help. They are small, with enrollments of 250 to 500, so teachers and principals tend to know every student by name. If discipline is tough, it's frequently combined with recognition and rewards for high grades and good citizenship. This tough love is designed to give students with few role models a sense that adults care

SWEATING THE SMALL STUFF:

Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism.

By David Whitman.
Fordham Institute.
365 pp. \$16.95

WORK HARD. BE NICE.

How Two Inspired Teachers Created the Most Promising Schools in America.

By Jay Mathews.
Algonquin.
328 pp. \$14.95

WHATEVER IT TAKES:

Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America.

By Paul Tough.
Houghton Mifflin.
296 pp. \$26

about them, and that hard work will pay big dividends.

“Learned optimism,” champions of these schools say, is key to coaxing students to put in the long hours needed to catch up with middle-class kids. Many of the new generation of schools—whose charters don’t bind them to district regulations or teacher union contracts—run two and a half hours

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longer a day than traditional public schools, teach students in the summer and on Saturdays, test them frequently, and tutor them relentlessly. KIPP Academy even provides an “extended warranty,” continuing to tutor and

counsel students after they move on to high school.

Whitman argues that paternalism is a better alternative to the educational progressivism he sees pervading public education. Progressive schools, he contends, fail to give students sufficient direction. But the division between paternalism and progressivism is not a bright line. As Jay Mathews makes clear in *Work Hard. Be Nice*, public schools are hardly dominated by romantics who think students can teach themselves. And the new urban schools Whitman admires embrace a range of progressive priorities, from educating the “whole child” to building field trips into the curriculum.

Launching and sustaining high-performing schools in tough neighborhoods is exceedingly difficult, as Mathews, a veteran *Washington Post* education reporter, reveals in his account of KIPP Academy’s parent organization, the Knowledge Is Power Program, a national network of 66 schools. KIPP was founded by David Levin and Michael Feinberg, Ivy Leaguers who met in 1992 at a summer training program for Teach for America, a nonprofit that recruits top college students for teaching jobs in underserved public schools. Smart, naive, and passionate about educating urban kids, Levin and Feinberg drafted the KIPP model out of frustration with their perform-

ance during two years in Teach for America classrooms in Houston, drawing heavily on the ideas of two veteran public school teachers who served as their mentors, Harriett Ball and Rafe Esquith.

After launching KIPP with Feinberg in 1994 with 47 fifth graders in a single Houston classroom, Levin decamped for New York (he’d grown up rich on the Upper East Side), and in 1995 he started KIPP Academy in the South Bronx. One of his early innovations was an orchestra that incorporates most of the school’s students and has given the institution a powerful identity. The two tiny KIPP charter schools bounced from building to building (and trailers) until 1999, when *60 Minutes* profiled them. Within a year, Doris and Don Fisher, the billionaire founders of the retailing giant The Gap, were financing KIPP’s national expansion.

But even in Mathews’s highly sympathetic telling, it’s clear that behind the flattering headlines, KIPP schools and others like them are fragile institutions, built on relentless work and no small amount of luck. Feinberg, Levin, and their colleagues labor more or less 24/7—knocking on doors in search of new students, battling attrition and reluctant school officials, scavenging space, tracking down donors, finding teachers. The pace often seems unsustainable, the schools never far from the edge of collapse.

In any case, Paul Tough argues compellingly in *Whatever It Takes* that new school models cannot by themselves transform urban education. A writer and editor at *The New York Times Magazine*, Tough tells the story of the Harlem Children’s Zone, a nonprofit agency working with 7,000 kids in 97 square blocks of central Harlem. To Geoffrey Canada, a product of the South Bronx who escaped to Long Island and then to Bowdoin College in Maine before founding the organization, “it wasn’t enough to help out in just one part of a child’s life: [Harlem’s Children’s Zone] would need to combine education, social, and medical services.”

Tough finds support for Canada’s flood-the-zone strategy in cognitive research. By the time kids start kindergarten, he writes, summarizing several studies, there is “a large and disturbing difference” between the cognitive ability scores of poor kids



Educational entrepreneurs are trying to reshape urban schools. Can their models work on a big enough scale to make a real difference?

and their middle-class counterparts. Contrary to the view Charles Murray articulated in his controversial book *The Bell Curve* (1994), Tough concludes that the problems of poverty don't flow from a lack of innate intelligence. (He points out that students born into poor families and adopted by wealthier ones outscore their impoverished peers.) But neither do these disparities reflect merely an absence of economic opportunities. Rather, the poor are poor in no small part because they lack cognitive skills that can be taught.

A major factor is children's experience with language. By the age of three, the children of professional parents have a vocabulary of about 1,100 words, while the children of parents on welfare have mastered fewer than half that number. The children in more affluent families also hear about 500,000 "encouragements" (words of praise and approval) and 80,000 "discouragements" (admonitions such as "stop that"). For welfare children, the scale is weighted heavily the other way: 80,000 encouragements and 200,000 discouragements. Researchers have found that a child's experience of language has more impact on IQ and achievement

than either race or social class.

Canada discovered the hard way that poor kids lack cognitive skills when he opened an elementary-middle charter school in 2004 and watched it struggle to satisfactorily improve middle-school test scores. He had run a handful of programs for Harlem kids since 1990—including antiviolence training for teenagers—and when he launched the Harlem Children's Zone in 1997, he added more: obesity and asthma initiatives; a parenting program called Baby College; language-rich, all-day, 11-month pre-kindergartens. When the charter school stalled, he added yet another link to this "conveyor belt": a longer and more advanced parenting program covering discipline, brain development strategies, and health for the 200 winners of a kindergarten lottery. And he took steps to ensure that more kids moved through the organization's entire early-childhood program. Now he's waiting to see the outcome.

A number of the new "no excuses" schools, meanwhile, have produced stellar results. For example, Whitman reports that 87 percent of KIPP Academy students passed the New York State

Regents eighth-grade math test in 2005–06, compared with 54 percent of students statewide, and no more than 16 percent in KIPP's neighboring South Bronx middle schools. Some critics have suggested that stronger students self-select into the schools' applicant pools, and that there's more attrition among the schools' weaker students. Whitman acknowledges that incoming students at KIPP Academy have "significantly stronger" skills than most South Bronx students, but says that "creaming" isn't commonplace in KIPP schools nationally. High rates of student attrition, Mathews concedes, are a "common occurrence" in KIPP schools.

The big question is whether the new models can be scaled up to reach the many students who need help. The answer is, not easily. In a decade, education entrepreneurs have created at most a couple hundred very strongly performing schools, serving perhaps 55,000 of the nation's more than eight million urban students. Among the major obstacles to a broader effort: Talented teachers and principals are hard to find and burn out quickly; the schools' longer calendar and other features that

are key to their success are expensive; and most of the schools have to pay for their own buildings and often receive less than their full share of state and local education aid. Lacking large infusions of philanthropy, many of the schools would founder financially, and the economic downturn has made the schools' plight even more precarious. The Harlem Children's Zone recently cut staff in the face of diminishing donations.

The challenge, then, is clear: Creating intensive educational environments without philanthropy would require more public funding, in many states and school systems, than charter schools—or many traditional public schools—currently receive. Impoverished students are most likely to climb the achievement ladder if they are given the kind of comprehensive help the Harlem Children's Zone supplies. But in bleak economic times, it's hard to be hopeful about funding. Then again, President Barack Obama has pledged to launch federally sponsored children's zones in 20 neighborhoods nationwide.

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CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

Mr. Wilson, It's Only Business

Reviewed by Robert Litwak

GEORGE KENNAN. HENRY Kissinger. Michael Corleone? Yes, at this critical historical juncture, the fictional antihero is making a foreign-policy offer that two specialists in the field believe we can't refuse. *The Godfather's* "unlikely wisdom" for our challenging times—as a new president attempts to preserve America's global standing in

THE GODFATHER DOCTRINE: A Foreign Policy Parable.

By John C. Hulsman and
A. Wess Mitchell.
Princeton Univ. Press.
85 pp. \$9.95

the face of war, economic crisis, and rising great powers—is elucidated in this funny, smart book, an expanded version of a widely read article John C. Hulsman and A. Wess Mitchell published last year. *The Godfather Doctrine* creatively transposes the iconic 1972 film that director Francis Ford Coppola intended as an allegory of American capitalism onto contemporary geopolitics.

The parable unfolds with the attempted hit on Don Vito Corleone, head of New York City's paramount organized-crime family, by Virgil "the Turk" Sollozzo. The young Turk turns to violence after the old-school Don rejects his proposal to expand the family's business into the lucrative but dirty drug trade. With the wounded Don out of action, the Corleone sons respond to this catalytic event—a frontal assault on the existing