

Excerpt of David Whitman's comments at Thomas B. Fordham Institute book event for "Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism," September 3, 2008:

It is my belief that education reformers, beat reporters, activists and policy analysts – that is, all of you who are assembled in this room today – tend to fall prey to what I would dub “the Ecclesiastes Syndrome,” or the conviction that when it comes to education, there is nothing new under the sun.

Within the education establishment, and even among education reformers, the collective reaction over the years to the gap-closing schools that I chronicle here has been to pat them on the head and say “that’s nice, but”.... and the list of buts, the list of reasons why the education establishment minimizes the impact and examples of these schools is long.

High-performing urban schools have been dismissed as heartwarming examples that can not be replicated because they depend on charismatic leaders. And whether it was the conservative Heritage Foundation writing about no excuses schools or the left-leaning Education Trust writing about high-flying schools, the skeptics assert that these schools might raise minority achievement, but they don’t raise it enough to close or come close to closing the achievement gap. They say the data on student achievement is inconsistent from year to year, and that even if a school closes the gap in elementary school, the gap is unbridgeable by high school. Or the superior performance of schools like KIPP Academy in the Bronx and Amistad Academy in New Haven is due to “creaming.” Both of those schools pick students through lotteries, but allegedly only the most talented, motivated students would bother to apply to the lotteries—or so the argument went.

In a nutshell, the response of the education establishment to no excuses schools was to make excuses about why they didn’t really matter.

If you are sitting back and thinking that this book is just the latest entrant in a string of reports on high-performing schools, I’m here to say, as Cher told Nicholas Cage in “Moonstruck,” “Get over it.” There *is* something new under the sun here about these schools, and sweating the small stuff is just the first such book about this extraordinary new breed of schools that will be coming out in the next half-year.

What’s new here is that this book is the first book that dismantles all the explanations that education experts have fallen back on, all the reasons to be dismissive about the import of a gap-closing secondary school in the inner-city. The six schools featured in this book do not depend on charismatic leaders for their success. They all adhere to discernable *models*, and they all are replicating themselves, sometimes in nearby neighborhoods and sometimes in distant cities.

For those unfamiliar with the schools featured in the book, let me tick them off quickly here: in Oakland, I wrote about the American Indian Public Charter School and its first copycat school, Oakland Charter Academy; in New Haven, I wrote about Amistad Academy, the flagship school for Achievement First schools; in Chicago, I studied Cristo

Rey Jesuit High School, the flagship school for the Cristo Rey network; in the Bronx, I visited KIPP Academy, one of KIPP's first schools; here in Washington [D.C.], I wrote about the SEED school, which at the time was the only public college-prep boarding school for low-income students in the United States; and finally, in Worcester, Massachusetts I studied the University Park Campus School.

The results to date of the efforts at replication at these six schools are impressive. And so is the mountain of evidence that these schools truly eliminate or come close to eliminating the achievement gap. All six schools report big, lasting jumps in academic achievement and attainment. At the three middle schools I wrote about, American Indian, Amistad, and KIPP, black and hispanic students not only do better on achievement tests than their white counterparts, they often outperform white students who come from affluent communities in their states.

In the remaining three high schools, black and hispanic students are more likely than their white peers to graduate from high school and be accepted into college. In short, these schools truly transforming the lives of their students.

It's true that, at most of these schools, students and their families have to apply to be entered in a school admissions lottery and this suggests an element of self-selection is going on among students. It's not true, however, that only gifted and talented students from extra-motivated two-parent families sign-up for the lotteries. It turns out that many of the students are one to two or even three grade levels behind when they walk in the door of these secondary schools.

Speaking now as a jaded reporter, who visited many "model" programs over the last two decades, these schools were one of the only social interventions I have ever seen that genuinely transformed the lives of low-income, minority students.

That's what new about this book, in my view—a compelling presentation that these schools are for real and are replicable. But why is that finding *important*, too? Well, if you believe, as I do, and as the founders of these schools do, that the achievement gap is the last great remaining civil rights issue in the United States, then the importance of these schools is transparent.

To summarize the achievement gap briefly, the average black or Hispanic 12th grader in the United States has the math, reading, and writing skills of the average white eighth grader. Whether you think this shameful four-year gap is a civil rights issue or not, it has huge implications for all of society, particularly because of the tragic trajectory of black male dropouts. By the time they are in their mid-thirties, a staggering 60 percent of black male dropouts have prison records.

So why is this book important? Because it shows how great schools can close this pernicious achievement gap. And I would argue that these schools represent the single most important innovation in education policy in the last decade. No other policy intervention that I'm aware of even comes close to closing the achievement gap—

[neither] the standard conservative prescriptions for closing the gap nor the liberal remedies.

Although these schools represent a radical departure from inner-city neighborhood schools that exist. Today, I am optimistic that hundreds, and perhaps as many as a thousand, of these exemplary schools can be created one day.

I am *not* optimistic, however, that entire school districts or states, will embrace what I call the “new paternalism.” The principles of the new paternalism that animate these schools are anathema to the three legs of the education establishment—the district bureaucracies, the teacher unions, and the education schools. I’d be happy to talk further about this in the question and answer session that follows.

Now I want to shift gears and talk for a moment about the controversy about my use of the term the ‘new paternalism.’ After the publication of Jay Mathews’ column [in the *Washington Post*], which proposed a naming contest to find a name that he felt was more suitable for these schools, various bloggers weighed in to say that they, too, believed “paternalistic” was a bad term that should not be used to describe these schools.

However, unlike Jay Mathews, and unlike the columnist George Will, virtually none of the bloggers criticizing the paternalism label has yet to actually read *Sweating the Small Stuff*. When I say that they have not read the book, I don’t mean to say that they skimmed the 33-page chapter I wrote about the history and use of the paternalism label. Or that they skimmed the opening and closing chapters and decided to opine about the book based on a cliff notes rendition.

I am saying that the bloggers who criticized the paternalism label literally have not seen the book. Since the book’s release, I have had the surreal experience, unimaginable in my day as a reporter, of having several reporters call me to write a piece about the book while confessing that they have not seen or read a word of it.

Had the bloggers bothered to read the book—or even to skim the relevant chapters--they would have discovered that a number of their objections to the “paternalism” label were dead wrong.

Where did the idea of labeling these schools as examples of the “new paternalism” come from? Let me start by talking for a moment about the character and ethos of these six schools.

Not surprisingly, all six of these schools had dedicated teachers, a rigorous curriculum pegged to state standards, additional time spent on task, and an extended school day and school year. They were all small schools too, places where, to borrow the phrase from the show “cheers,” “everyone knows your name.” In the penultimate chapter of the book I compile a top twenty list of the habits of highly effective schools, the highly abbreviated version of which is included in your handouts.

But I do not think it is possible to spend time in these schools without being struck, above all, by a curious combination. These schools, on the one hand, relentlessly supervise and monitor the behavior of their students. And yet, at the same time, there is a strong sense of personal, almost family-like connection between teacher and student and between principal and student.

The new paternalistic institutions are not like the paternalistic institutions of the past. They are not harsh or forbidding, nor are they glorified juvenile detention centers or teen boot camps. In fact, a number of these paternalistic schools were founded by left-leaning educators. Teachers at these schools are both authoritative *and* caring figures.

Teachers, male and female alike, are remarkably well-informed about the home lives and struggles of students. They laugh with students and gently tease them. It is telling that many students describe their schools as a “second home.”

And yet, all six of the schools I visited ceaselessly monitor student behavior. They penalize bad behavior and reward and recognize academic achievement and good character. The schools, moreover, are *not* just academically demanding institutions. And they are *not* just strict, authoritarian schools in the manner, say, of a traditional catholic school—they are highly-*prescriptive* schools that are determined to mold student character. They seek to instill self-discipline, perseverance, respect for elders, politeness, and other traditional virtues. Liberal supporters of these schools say that the schools are building “non-cognitive” skills that will enable students one day to get through college, and land and maintain a job.

These schools are fixated on curbing signs of disorder; they very much subscribe to James Q. Wilson’s famous broken windows theory, i.e., the notion that urban schools are not undone so much by violence itself in the classroom or the school yard as by the *perception* of disorder, of the broken window left unfixed.

At KIPP schools, students frequently are told to correct their SLANT—Sit Up, Listen, Ask and Answer Questions, Nod your head to show that you are listening, and Track the speaker. At Amistad Academy, teachers drill into students that they are supposed to “sweat the small stuff”—hence the title of the book—down to tucking in their shirts and never rolling their eyes at a teacher.

At Cristo Rey schools, students learn that they cannot go off to their one-day-a-week clerical jobs without learning to shake hands properly, answer a phone and take a message, and without knowing the difference between a dinner fork and a salad fork. Girls’ earrings may be no larger than a quarter—and they can only use soft colors for eye shadow. Wearing a watch is recommended. But the watches cannot have sports logos or cartoon figures on the timepiece.

The new paternalist schools, however, are also more palatable to liberals because they build up the “cultural capital” of low-income students by taking them to concerts, to Shakespearean plays, on field trips to Washington, D.C., and to national parks.

Now, even if Jay Mathews and I ultimately disagree on a label for these schools, I hope we can agree on the facts. And the fact is, I think, that this is a fair depiction of how these schools actually operate. If we can agree that this combination of prescriptiveness and connection characterizes these schools, then the debate over paternalism largely becomes a debate over semantics. And then it becomes possible for school leaders elsewhere to adopt the principles of these highly effective schools, even if they resist calling their schools “paternalistic”.

So, how in the world did I dream up this moniker, “the new paternalism”? The truth is, I didn’t dream it up. The “new paternalism” is a movement that social scientists have been writing about for more than a decade. In fact, in 1997, the Brookings Institution—no bastion of reactionary thought—published a 350-page volume entitled *The New Paternalism: Supervisory Approaches to Poverty* in which various luminaries explored the reach of the new paternalism in welfare offices, prisons, schools, and other public institutions. A decade ago, I wrote a long piece about the new paternalism for *U.S. News & World Report*. And it is difficult to read the description of the new paternalism in this book without having the model of these schools leap off the page at you.

Unlike the paternalism of a century ago, the new paternalism was benevolent rather than malevolent. The old paternalism required welfare recipients to work off their checks and to live in poorhouses; the new paternalism provided “help and hassle” to able-bodied clients instead. Those on welfare still had to demonstrate to their caseworkers that they were looking for work and were willing to take jobs, under the threat of losing their benefits. But caseworkers, meanwhile, would help them find and secure work.

As Lawrence Mead, the editor of the Brookings volume, pointed out, new paternalist programs only work because they typically enforce values that clients “already believe”—and this is the case at the new paternalist schools. Rare is the parent who thinks it is a good idea for their child to be disruptive or do poorly in school.

The negative response to the paternalism label is thus not a backlash against the concept of the new paternalism as it is used in the social sciences or as it is practiced at these schools. Rather it is a too-swift reaction to the stereotypical associations of what it means to act paternalistically--which Jay Mathews describes as “the clumsy and often harmful doings of stiff-necked dads”.

It’s time for the political left in particular and the education establishment in general to rethink its instinctual antipathy to paternalism, to the “P-word.”

But my plea here today is two-fold. First, as we debate here and elsewhere the proper label for these schools, let’s not get too hung up on labels. That would blind us to the underlying agreement on the traits of these gap-closing schools. And second, let’s not fall prey to the Ecclesiastes Syndrome. Let’s not minimize the importance of these schools to the future of inner-city school reform. Let’s not assume that these schools are such rare hothouse flowers that they can not be reproduced.