

## Coming to an inner city near you, extreme education

Small US academies with tough rules and excellent results are model for British

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Some call it extreme education: 10-hour days, parental contracts and zero tolerance behaviour policies in small, 200-pupil academies. The result, seen in an evolving breed of US school, is 100% college acceptance, test scores to rival private schools, and south Bronx teenagers who play the viola like their Manhattan neighbours.

The small school movement has been accused of undoing decades of progressive education. But its greatest proponents claim to be part of a new civil rights movement working to free America's urban underclass from a cycle of under-achievement.

James Verrilli, principal of the North Star Academy in Newark, America's second poorest city, said: "These kids know drugs, these kids know crime and violence. Fathers are absent through incarceration. We have established a school culture which is very distinct from the attitude they walk in the door with. It's a college-bound culture."

In the UK the political debate about the achievement gap between rich and poor in schools is gathering pace. Ofsted last week highlighted the "stark divide" in achievement linked to social class and the government has set itself tough new targets on reducing the gap. Three London academies are experimenting with small school principles and last week a group of British teachers in training to run inner city schools visited the US looking for methods to tackle the dire state of "complex urban education".

At the North Star Academy children called Charism and Queen-Ama smile politely as they shake your hand and welcome you in. Some 85% of pupils are African American and 90% get free school meals. Last year 80% were graded "proficient or advanced" in maths, compared with 28% in the local neighbourhood school, and exceeding state averages. Pupils work in silence with a professionalism learned during a three-day process. From the beginning pupils are taught to speak clearly, answer questions in full sentences and look the teacher in the eye.

Parents have to sign a three-way contract with their child and the principal, promising to pull their weight.

When a child's homework isn't handed in by 8am there is a phone call home. When the parent doesn't turn up for a meeting, their child is not allowed back into school until they turn up. Signs telling them "No excuses" line the walls.

"I was working until 11 last night. I'm tired, but I know I've got to [work]," says one 11-year-old, as she finishes up a "brain food" worksheet over breakfast. "Even my mother's gone back to school since I've been here."

Pupils are tested every six weeks and their results scrutinised.

"As a principal of a small school I know what every child is up to in terms of their academic achievement and their behaviour," says Mr Verrilli. It's an accountability that is extended to teachers: Mr Verrilli will sit in on classes with a Blackberry emailing the instructor his notes as they teach.

North Star and its small school peers have evolved out of the 3,500-strong charter school movement in the US. Like academies in Britain, charter schools are independent schools, funded by the state, and allowed more freedom to set policies, including their admissions procedures. It runs a lottery for admissions and has 1,800

children on the waiting list. Parents have to put their child's name into the lottery and there are discrepancies in who does so; they get three girls who apply to every boy.

Mr Verrilli vehemently denies any suggestion that his students might not be the most needy. "It's a prejudice to say that parents from disadvantaged backgrounds don't care about their kids' education. Ninety-five per cent of parents just want a better education for their children.

"We're not creaming. I'm defensive about that. It's something we're accused of a lot. How hard is it to put your child's name down on a piece of paper?" he said.

Every child who attends the Kipp (Knowledge is Power Programme) academy in south Bronx, New York, plays in its orchestra, the best school ensemble in the city. Every child can read music.

Shirley Lee, a director of the Kipp academy in the Bronx, says it works because there is a consistent approach across every part of the school.

"The truth and reality is that kids like structure," she said. "It's about telling them what's appropriate and them learning when to use it. I wouldn't talk to you like I am now if I was out in some of these areas. But if we teach them to look in my eyes when I'm speaking to them, they will use that if they get stopped by the police and that will protect them."

Ark, an academy sponsor in the UK funded by hedge fund millionaires, is taking key planks of the small school model into London academies.

Lucy Heller, managing director of Ark, says: "There's something in the air: it's small schools, tough behaviour management and an adamant belief that inner city children can do just as well."

The schools minister, Lord Adonis, says small schools can teach disadvantaged children the skills that their middle class peers take for granted: "High ambition, zero tolerance of failure, an expectation that children will go to university and that schools will give them the education to do so."

Ark is also part-funding the 30 "Future Leaders" on the school leadership training scheme visiting the US. They are expected to take some of the ideas they witnessed home. There are high hopes the two-year-old programme will help to fill the leadership deficit in the UK. Its chief executive is Heath Monk, a former top schools civil servant. Among the Future Leaders is Peter Hyman, onetime spin doctor to Tony Blair, turned classroom assistant, turned teacher. They are being mentored by two respected "superheads", Sir Iain Hall and Dame Sharon Hollows.

Many of the trainees see limits in how translatable the model is to the UK. They talk about the fact that most of the US schools are middle schools, for 10-14-year-olds. The model has been tested less in the secondary school age group (11-18). They also ask how smaller schools can be afforded, though others point out the fact that in the US facilities are basic. Unlike English academies there are no award-winning architectural designs. Just classrooms.

"They don't even have interactive whiteboards," says Sir Ian. "They just teach. Small schools might not be practical in the UK, but what I really want these new school leaders to take back is the sense of culture in these schools."

At North Star a teacher asks Mr Verrilli about work-life balance, and how teachers are expected to put in 12-hour days on top of weekends and holidays - and give their numbers for parents and pupils to contact them out of hours. There is no need for work-life balance, he says. "This is a civil rights movement, as if to say Martin Luther King didn't need work-life balance, why should they?"