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## Despite Success, California's American Indian Charter Expansion Thwarted

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 Written By: Sarah McIntosh  
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American Indian Public Charter School, officially the top school in California, wants to expand, but local authorities are standing in the way. The Oakland middle school, which serves more than 400 students on two campuses, routinely beats its inner-city peers on state tests, and its attendance record hovers around 99 percent.

Although Oakland Unified School District officials praise the school's performance record, they have routinely denied AIPSC's applications for additional charters since 2008.

Former AIPSC Principal Ben Chavis says he knows why the schools haven't expanded in nearly four years.

"If they kept approving our charters, we'd put [the district] out of business," he said. "The Oakland Unified School District hates competition. Does this surprise anyone?"

### From Worst to First

AIPCS was first chartered in 1996 with a mission to improve the academic performance of low-income and Native American children. When Chavis took over as principal in 2000, AIPCS was the lowest-performing middle school in the struggling East Bay district.

By the time Chavis stepped down in 2007, the school was the fourth-highest performing school in the state. That same year, AIPCS won a National Blue Ribbon Award, which the U.S. Department of Education gives to the top 250 public or private schools in the nation.

Last year AIPCS reached the state's top spot, boasting an Academic Performance Index score of 988 out of 1,000, based on standardized test scores and demographics. The statewide average score in 2010 was 767. The target is 800.

AIPCS was granted charters in 2007 to open a second middle school and a high school. In 2010, 100 percent of the black students and 95 percent of Latinos in Oakland Unified who passed the Advanced Placement calculus test came from American Indian Public High School.

### Focus on Basics, Discipline

Chavis, whose candor won him as many enemies as admirers during his tenure, attributes the school's turnaround to longer hours, more intense focus on English and mathematics, unwavering discipline (students wear uniforms, and those who don't complete homework assignments must sit on the floor, for example), and pairing a single teacher with each class of students during their three-year stay.

"We have smart teachers and a principal who does not accept being pushed around from teachers, superintendents, or school board members," Chavis said.

### 'Best in the State'

Andrew Coulson, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, gives a great deal of credit for AIPCS's success to Chavis, whom he described as "a cross between Socrates and Dirty Harry." Given his students' academic performance, Coulson said, it's hard to argue with the merits of Chavis's no-nonsense methods.

"Based on my findings, the American Indian charter network is not only the best in the state, the margin by which it outperforms other charter networks and the public school average is greater than most people realize," Coulson said.

AIPCS academically outperforms two of the most selective public schools in the nation, Coulson notes: Lowell High in San Francisco and Gretchen Whitney High near Los Angeles.

"That's despite the fact that charter schools must accept all applicants or use a random lottery for admissions if they are oversubscribed," he added.

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Robert Holland, an award-winning journalist and author who has championed school choice throughout his career, is a Heartland Institute Senior Fellow addressing education policy. His book on teacher preparation, *To Build a Better Teacher: The Emergence of a Competitive Education Industry*, was published by Praeger Paperbacks in 2004

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**Model 'Can Be Replicated'**

The American Indian charter schools embody what is best about the decades-old charter school experiment, says Lindsey Burke, a policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC.

"The appeal of charter schools is that when innovative and successful approaches to education are created, those models can be replicated in other cities," Burke said. "When a charter school fails at providing a quality education, the school can be closed down. This is the great advantage the charter approach has over traditional public schools."

Chavis says he has no doubt the schools can be replicated, and he rejects the idea that AIPCS is "just another example of a charismatic school leader doing wonders in one or a few schools with sizeable investments from philanthropists and then disappearing," in his words.

"The top five schools in Oakland are also the top five charter schools in the state of California," Chavis said. "They are the five schools using the American Indian Model."

"The question is not is 'It replicable' but 'Why isn't it being replicated?' Why aren't public schools replicating the American Indian Model? Weren't they supposed to learn from charter schools?" Chavis asks. "The law was passed to allow charter schools to be innovation incubators so that mainstream public schools could learn from them. But they haven't."

**'We Work. We're Effective'**

Cato's Coulson says the reason school districts have not adopted the American Indiana model is because the system is not flexible enough or amenable to competition.

"Consumer choice plays a crucial role in the process by which excellent services scale up in every field outside of education—and the limited or absent choice afforded to families within the public school system is a major reason why educational excellence fails to scale," Coulson explained.

"In California, for instance, the entrenched monopolists get to decide which charter networks can expand and which can't," Coulson said. "It is not in their interest to allow great charters to flourish."

Chavis offers an even more blunt explanation of why county education officials have rebuffed the school's attempts to expand.

"Because we're good," he said. "We work. We're effective. We've proven that what we do works," he said.

*Sarah McIntosh (mcintosh.sarah@gmail.com) is a constitutional scholar writing from Lawrence, Kansas.*

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