



Andrew J. Coulson

Tough Love

How Ben Chavis works education wonders

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[*Crazy Like a Fox: One Principal's Triumph in the Inner City*](#), by Ben Chavis (NAL Hardcover, 304 pp., \$24.95)

Once, as a young boy, Ben Chavis wandered unwittingly onto the grounds of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke with some friends. In short order, a man approached them and shouted: “You darkies get out of here! You’re trespassing!” For the past decade, Chavis has been preparing the next generation of poor minority kids to be welcomed through the front gates of top colleges around the country. He’s succeeding beyond everyone’s expectations, except his own.

When Chavis took over the American Indian Public Charter School in 2000, it was the worst-performing middle school in Oakland. Within seven years, it was the fourth-highest ranking middle school in the entire state of California. The other top-scoring schools are overwhelmingly wealthy and white; Chavis’s former students at AIPCS (he recently retired as principal) are low-income and mostly black, Hispanic, or American Indian.

Crazy Like a Fox is the story of their academic ascent, and it’s unlike any other book of its kind because Ben Chavis himself is one-of-a-kind—passionate, intense, and brutally honest. Like a character in a high-concept Hollywood film, he unabashedly tells whomever he’s speaking with exactly what’s on his mind. And his thoughts often tend toward the controversial. The reactions he inspires range from shock and outrage to admiration and awe.

All of this comes through in his book, in which Chavis unflinchingly skewers those he faults for ruining the educational hopes of generations of minority kids. Though a Democrat, he rails against “far-to-the-left liberals who in my opinion are worse than the Ku Klux Klan. . . . They love for minorities to have the illusion that we can make choices, but when families are given the chance to choose a public charter school, like AIPCS, these ‘saviors’ always find a way to interfere.”

It goes without saying that much of the education establishment finds Chavis infuriating. Yet several attempts to remove him ultimately failed. His incontrovertible success as a principal acted like professional body armor. And while Chavis is keen to document his school’s success based on statewide tests, the book has a conversational feel, interleaving the formative experiences of his youth with the exposition of his school’s methods, trials, and triumphs.

Chavis grew up the son of destitute sharecroppers in segregated rural North Carolina. A Lumbee Indian, he learned firsthand how racist stereotypes circumscribed opportunities for non-whites. Those experiences drive his educational approach today. AIPCS students are taught that they can’t afford to give prospective colleges or employers any reason to doubt their skills or work ethic. And they learn this not merely by being told, but through the strictly enforced school rules to which all students must

adhere, and their parents accept.

Students arriving late to school must sit on the floor. Chairs are a privilege, not an entitlement. Cell phones may not be used, or even seen, within the school. The same goes for jewelry. Violators see their property confiscated—not until the end of the school day, but the end of the school *year*. Families who want the property returned sooner have an option: withdraw their kids from AIPCS.

Chavis is particularly sensitive to how students present themselves. He's aware that young people, especially minorities, are judged by their appearance. The school mandates a simple uniform of khaki pants and white shirts, and pants must be worn around the students' waists, not "hangin' off their butts."

Other schools have similar rules. But Chavis enforces them. That might seem an insurmountable challenge given the gang culture and tough attitudes that pervade his school's neighborhood, but Chavis is a cross between Socrates and Dirty Harry, and for him it seems easy. When a few boys started letting their pants sag to expose their underwear, they were sent to his office. For the occasion, he had picked up a quantity of fluorescent pink mason's string. He fashioned belts for some of his wayward charges out of the string, tying conspicuous pink bows in front "for extra embarrassment." For others, he improvised garish suspenders. The boys broke the rules to look cool, Chavis knew, so to bring them back in line, he made them look ridiculous. To avoid a repeat of that embarrassment, they started wearing their pants back up around their waists.

Plenty of observers are appalled that Chavis embarrasses students to enforce school rules. He has no patience for such critics, whom he sees as lacking perspective. "Some may call my use of public humiliation extreme; however, Oakland is an extreme city with a high homicide rate. I would rather embarrass them now than see my students get killed." Having endured an extreme childhood of his own—in which he suffered through shortages of food and clothing, the abuse of a brutal alcoholic father, and the witnessing of a gory murder—Chavis will do whatever it takes to instill in his students the values, knowledge, and skills they need to thrive.

Crazy Like a Fox also describes the pedagogical choices that Chavis made to achieve his school's stellar results: longer hours, more intense focus on English and mathematics, insistence on completed homework, and having a single teacher paired with each class of students through their entire three-year stay at the middle school, teaching every class except physical education. Given his students' academic success, it's hard to argue with the merits of these arrangements.

Chavis also comes out solidly in favor of the federal No Child Left Behind act, which requires states to test students at regular intervals, report the results on a school-by-school basis broken down by student race and ethnicity, and take action to improve schools that fail to make "adequate yearly progress." Here, his views are more open to debate, since he offers no evidence to show that NCLB has fulfilled its often worthy goals. Readers interested in an empirical assessment of NCLB's merits will have to look elsewhere.

But Chavis's book succeeds in what it sets out to do: tell the story of how a "country Indian" from the wrong side of the river grew into a fiercely determined educational leader, and how he turned a failing school into a model of excellence for the nation.

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