

The New York Times

N.Y. / Region

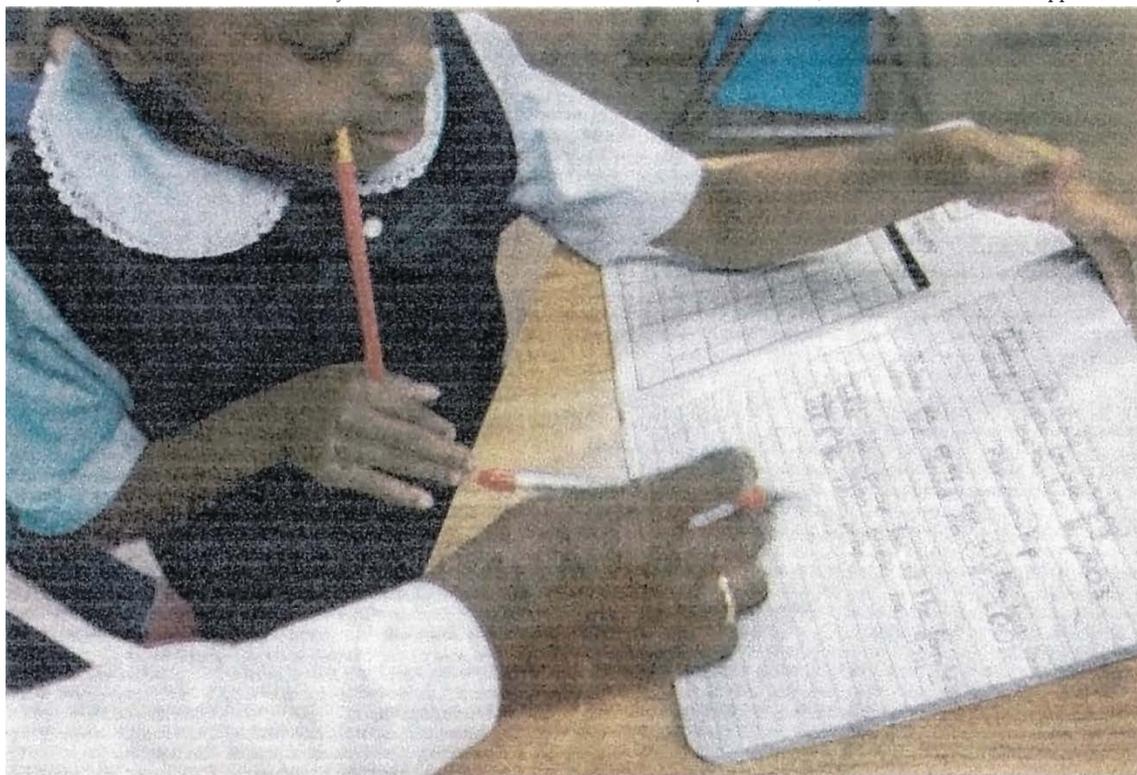
A Private School That Thrives on Rules

Minority Students Excel at Brooklyn Site. Is It a Model or an Anomaly?

By JANE GROSS

Published: September 24, 2003

Correction Appended



A.B. Whitfield, above, runs the Trey Whitfield School in East New York, Brooklyn, on a program of discipline and high expectations.

At left, a first-grade student pondered a lesson on penmanship.

Photographs by Marilyn K. Yee/The New York Times

At the Trey Whitfield School in a bleak corner of Brooklyn, toddlers imitate consonant and vowel sounds and learn that "cup" starts with C, not K. Teenagers understand that the rules prohibit gold teeth, coarse talk in the hallways and hip-hop fashions.

All jump to their feet when an adult enters the classroom. "Good morning, Mr. Whitfield," the children chant, welcoming A. B. Whitfield, who runs this 20-year-old private school where poor black and Hispanic youngsters consistently excel, compared with their public school counterparts.

"Good morning, babies," Mr. Whitfield replies, kneeling to kiss the little ones and rising to an imposing 6-foot-3 to praise the older boys and girls for firm handshakes.

Trey Whitfield, in East New York, is a hybrid institution. It has the autonomy of a private school, the demographics of an urban public school and the religious and disciplinary trappings of a parochial school. It spends a mere \$4,000 per pupil, less than half of classroom spending in New York City public schools.

Its proponents say other schools should study Trey Whitfield's practices as they strive to close the achievement gap between white and nonwhite students, one of the pressing educational issues of the day.

Trey Whitfield students perform two or three years above grade level on national achievement tests. On the state reading and math exams, they rack up 3's and 4's on a 1-to-4 scoring system, while 2's are the norm in public schools. None of these tests are

required in private school, but Mr. Whitfield knows that without them, "nobody is going to believe us."

The governing principle at the school is that structure, calm and safety are prerequisites for learning. "If we didn't have order, we couldn't teach these kids at all," Mr. Whitfield said, acknowledging that some people find his techniques robotic.

In addition, he said, minority children must learn that unkempt dreadlocks and drooping jeans may count as strikes against them when they leave East New York for the wider world. "I'm thinking future, far beyond here," he said. "It worked for me. I wasn't a thug."

But even educators who admire his success say the school, with 470 students from nursery to eighth grade, is an anomaly,

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not a model. It is skimming the most committed families from the public school population, they say, and operating without the encumbrances of a system that receives government funds.

"It's not an apples and apples comparison," said Steven Sanders, chairman of the State Assembly Education Committee. Still, Mr. Sanders said, Trey Whitfield's results suggest that leadership is the key to educational success, followed by parental involvement, with money a distant third.

Trey Whitfield is not a haven for a gifted few, bound for Horace Mann or Andover on full scholarship and then to the Ivy League. These are average students, more likely to attend the Poly Prep Country Day School in Brooklyn or the New Hampton School in New Hampshire.

Students come mostly from working-class families in eastern Brooklyn, the children of nurses' aides and bus drivers, teachers and police officers. Everyone is nonwhite, reflecting the demographics of this swath of Brooklyn. Some live in two-parent households, and others with single mothers or fathers, with grandmothers or in foster homes.

The school lives a hand-to-mouth existence, paying its operating expenses solely with the \$3,000-a-head tuition. It gets by with no computers, science lab or cafeteria, in three prefabricated modules. There are no assistant principals or secretaries, but many volunteers like Ma Jackson, as she is known, an 84-year-old retired baby nurse who can still do the hokeypokey with the students.

Another area where the school must make do is the salaries of teachers, none of them unionized and some uncertified. Brenda Morris, a newcomer with four children, earns \$16,000, about \$24,000 less than at her last job, at Public School 150. Ava Bradshaw, who has been here the longest -- more than 19 years -- makes \$33,000. The teachers receive health insurance and free tuition for their children.

But Mr. Whitfield treasures the school's autonomy. He has the freedom to reject or

Trey Whitfield School is much admired, but might not be imitated.

expel students. Corporal punishment is permitted, although it has never been necessary, he said. And Christian prayer is part of the school day.

The admissions process is less about a child's I.Q. than a parent's attitude. The children are tested, but only to determine whether to put them back a grade. If a parent resists such a move, Mr. Whitfield said, he often encourages them to go elsewhere. The school also turns away children with severe learning disabilities, because it has no special education teachers.

Latecomers to the school may balk at the rigid rules. One sixth grader, who arrived last fall from P.S. 297 in Bedford-Stuyvesant, had talked out of turn, complained about her watch-plaid uniform and tried to sow rebellion. But she "conformed in no time," said Deborah Johnson, the girl's social studies teacher.

Less successful was the admission of an eighth-grade boy, already left back twice. One day on the bus, the boy asked a girl for oral sex, Mr. Whitfield said. His grandmother, struggling to raise him, begged that he not be expelled.

Mr. Whitfield rejected her plea. "We don't do that here," he said. He said the boy was the only child ever thrown out.

Mr. Whitfield, 61, who played football for the Dallas Cowboys and taught for nearly two decades in New York City public schools, is an inveterate hugger. He lavishes attention on the boys, trying to prove by example that men can be both formidable and gentle.

His companion, Janie C. Whitney, 63, a former Wall Street controller who founded the school and is now its chief executive

officer, is less demonstrative. But she sometimes rebraids girls' hair, and talks about puberty with those who have no mother. (The couple named the school for their son Trey, who died in a boating accident at 18.)

Adults at the school set the standard. They, too, have a dress code: skirts for women and jackets and ties for men, except on Wednesdays. Even then, jeans are not allowed. Rather than complain about his black oxfords, one student bragged, "I got shoes just like Mr. Whitfield's."

The school recently attracted the interest of Seymour Fliegel, a leader of the small schools movement in East Harlem public schools in the 1970's and now director of the Center for Educational Excellence. Mr. Fliegel admires the traditional curriculum and would like to see the school gain charter status, which would provide government funds but compromise Mr. Whitfield's ability to do things his way.

Philanthropists are also taking notice. One is Joe Wilkinson, a retired consultant in Chicago who runs a foundation that assists six urban charter and private schools. Mr. Wilkinson helped Trey Whitfield raise \$2 million for a down payment on a five-story building not far from the current Linden Boulevard site. A move could come as early as this spring.

Kenneth Farrell, a mortgage broker whose daughter is an eighth grader, said that rules at home, like addressing all adults by their surnames, are tolerated because classmates do the same. And Darryl C. Towns, a state assemblyman with a 7-year-old here and a 2-year-old due to start next year, said that what goes on at school "parallels our teaching" about God and goodness.

Mr. Towns chose Trey Whitfield because of its focus on early reading, with phonics and the rudiments of grammar introduced to 3- and 4-year-olds.

Just to be sure, on the third day of school, Donna White put her 25 kindergartners through their paces.

"What letter do you hear at the end of 'fox'?" she asked. "Is it an S?"

Every hand went up. "No, it's an X," one child said.

Mrs. White asked for other letters that sound like each other. The children quickly suggested G and J, K and C and U and O.

"You know what, boys and girls?" the teacher said. "You're going to make Mrs. White's year very easy."

Correction: October 2, 2003, Thursday An article on Sept. 24 about Trey Whitfield, a private school in Brooklyn that has fostered academic excellence among black and Hispanic students, misstated the title of Seymour Fliegel, who praised it, and the name of the organization he heads. He is president, not director, of the Center for Educational Innovation -- Public Education Association (not the Center for Educational Excellence).

Reprinted from *The New York Times* Wednesday, September 24, 2003



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

Students in the yard of the Trey Whitfield School on Linden Boulevard in East New York, Brooklyn.