Crash Course
Chris Whittle

Brilliant fireworks. A few duds but overall a fabulous intellectual display.

This book is so rich in ideas that it is hard to choose a single centerpiece, but I try. His mantra for the learning process is to empower the student. Emphasize unsupervised, independent learning. Maximize the use of technology. Have students take responsibility for their own education, and for teaching each other, especially younger students. Give students responsibility for the work of the school itself, not just cleaning up, though that's a great start, but also for record keeping and even helping with grading.

In a sentence (my own), shift the role of the student from passive to active; from "The teacher teaches" to "The student learns." Today's dominant model is variously known as the "Dixie Cup" or the "Beer Stein" model. The kid opens his mind and the teacher pours in knowledge. A cup at a time. The predictable result is that kids wind up with a smattering of facts in place of what they need, a structure of knowledge.

Whittle laments that public education has no R&D facility. The truth is even sadder. There is. The 24,000 member American Education Research Association is the creature of the establishment: Schools of Education, state agencies, foundations, school boards and unions, with an overlay of Federal policy. Its primary agenda seems to be social justice: the questions of equity, equality and adequacy in funding, of "closing the gap" between minority and white/Asian performance, and being the champion of society's victims: the bullied, the gay, the transgendered, the people of color and the poor. As Whittle suggests, there is not much emphasis on improving the nuts and bolts processes involved in running a school establishment.

The educational statistics community often finds itself at odds with educational researchers, who tend to hold tenaciously to pet theories whether or not they hold up to rigorous statistical analysis. In addition there are many legitimate obstacles to research. It takes a large sample size to achieve statistically significant results. Institutional Review Boards, overinterpreting federal policy make it devilishly hard for universities to do human subjects research, like using school children. The timeframes in which improvements manifest themselves may be years and even decades. The upshot is that notions such as "whole language" and "everyday math" can enter the mainstream on the basis of strong advocacy more than extensive research. An EMO, funding its own research, would be at a tremendous advantage. They could more thoroughly plan their research and control most of the variable parameters. Perhaps most important, driven by the bottom line more than academic ego, they would be more likely to reject schemes that don't work.

Whittle puts undue faith in the charter school model. While it is the model he knows best, it is not the only model available, or necessarily the best. Much of what he proposes would work well with private schools and home schools. Private schools could certainly benefit by outsourcing many of the business functions he names. Home schoolers could

benefit from the curricula, distance learning, standardized testing and such that an EMO might provide. The governing bodies of charter schools, the chartering authority and the volunteer school boards, vary widely in quality and proclivity to interfere in school operations.

Whittle's experience has been shaped by the priorities of the national education establishment. They contract with EMOs such as Edison only after all else has failed. As a result, Whittle's experience has been primarily with poor and minority students. While he recognizes that average students also suffer from today's mediocre offerings, they don't get much attention. He does not distinguish between two issues:
1) Every group of students has more potential than is drawn out by the schools they currently attend, but that notwithstanding
2) Students in affluent neighborhoods, and some groups such as the Chinese, as Whittle tacitly concedes, have more ability than other groups.

While Whittle is entirely correct in his claim that group membership should never condemn a child to less of an education than he is capable of mastering, he is wrong to claim that 99.9% of children can achieve literacy and numeracy. That would place the cutoff point at an IQ of 57, a level at which no school could succeed within reasonable resource constraints.

Whittle has a rosy view of the potential of Government. I have been through the merit pay battles in the much more forgiving environment of private schools. Teachers distrust it because it relies so much on subjective judgment and the kids assigned to a given teacher. Moreover, it would require government to delegate significant judgment to its functionaries, an act contrary to its every instinct. One major reason that government contracts out programming, construction and other such tasks is that private contractors are free to hire, fire and reward employees in proportion to their contributions. That is a strong reason for engaging an EMO at a high level and leaving the staffing questions to them.

The Academies for Principals he recommends are an excellent idea. The Federal Government is precisely the wrong organization to select to run it. It would be saddled immediately with all of Congress' inconsistent and impossible objectives and notions of political correctness. How about the University of Phoenix? Or better yet, have a prestigious program like Harvard add an MBA in Education Management?

Whittle understands the educational potential of computers far better than any school leader I've known. Kids need to be conversant with the productivity packages such as Microsoft Word and Excel, or their equivalents. I would add that they should know Adobe, a drawing package and a photo management package, and be conversant with scanners and optical character recognition. And either eliminate PowerPoint or get kids to work up from flip charts; stressing the outlined organization and not the razzle-dazzle.

Whittle recognizes that today's textbooks are pabulum. He should add that the heavy paper and prodigious use of glossy photos make them unduly expensive and are creating

generation of hunchbacks. Get rid of them! Let the kids download curricular materials from the web and read them as PDFs on their laptops, or e-paper, or even print them at home as a last resort. '50s textbooks are as good as today's for English and math, and their copyrights probably go for a song. Original materials are probably more appropriate in many instances for science, history and other subjects. Oh, and by the way, it eliminates the excuse "I left the book at school/home/the library."

One of Whittle's big ideas, one with which I heartily concur, is that kids should learn to work on their own and in groups, away from adult supervision, at earlier ages and to a much greater extent than they do now. This will require a radical cultural change. Today, when the pressure of adult supervision is removed, the kids mostly take it as a license to goof off. The wholesale change in mindset is this: A school is a place for children to learn rather than for teachers to teach.

Building on this observation, Whittle needs to posit that the laptops he gives kids are capable of connecting with the school computer. The Internet makes this almost a given. Kids need to be able to get homework assignments, track their progress, and submit assignments via computer. They should also use computers to do classwork. If (big if) calculators are ever justified in teaching math, they should be replaced by spreadsheets, which do a far superior job of executing arithmetic.

Whittle and I agree that Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), the centerpiece of NCLB, is a good idea. Certainly the proper measure of educational progress is the amount of incremental learning that takes place under one teacher over the course of a year. It is also a hard thing to measure. Whittle recognizes the need for ongoing assessment, monitoring students' progress throughout the school year. He does not go into the implications for school management. Either the kids must be subjected to a constant regimen of standardized testing (demoralizing, a bad use of time, but required by State and District authorities) or their work products must be continually measured against criteria for learning.

To the extent that students use computers to produce their work products, they can be subjected to district-wide statistical analysis by software in addition to being graded by the teacher. There is even software available for such subjective purposes as rating essays; you wouldn't want to use it to grade papers, but to measure the overall progress of a classroom it works fine. Collecting student work in an automated portfolio, as Edison does, is essential for standardizing measures of student progress across units larger than a classroom. Passive assessment of student portfolios by software, which Edison does not yet claim to do, will provide more data and broader analyses with less stress on the kids and less time away from the core task of learning.

Whittle's plans for his fictional Middleburg school district are genius. He would have the district outsource all of the tasks in which there are economies of scale to be realized. No small district can afford to staff efficiently to manage technology, record keeping, professional development, hiring, curriculum development, textbook selection and the like. These tasks can be far better managed by an EMO.