

Billboard

No excuses charter schools offer kids a deal: You work hard and follow a ton of strict rules, we'll keep you safe and get you into college. Which appeals to lots of parents:

TIMES: If they're making kids cry, I'm in!

I used to teach in one of these schools. Now, I'm tracking down my former students to find out how the deal worked out for them.

AMARI: My thought throughout the entire day was I don't want to get in trouble. I don't want to get in trouble. I don't want to get in trouble.

MANNY: You gave me a detention. Cause you said I lied to you.

DJ: I gave you a detention for that?!

MARIA: I would do it all over again. 100%

But now, my old school has turned its back on the no excuses model that brought it so much acclaim.

Jones: We will never go back to the days of children raising their arms for a dress code check, or being escorted by an adult just to use the restroom.

But can they still keep kids safe and get great results without it?

Archive: Stabbing__news: Three teens stabbed during a fight outside of Chicago Bulls College Prep.

I'm DJ Cashmere, and this is No Excuses, a documentary from American Public Media. First, this news.

Prologue Part 1

DJ Cashmere: I'm outside a Chicago high school on a sunny morning in September, 2021. It's the first day of school.

DAVIS: Two minutes. Two minutes before we're open the doors, and we're very excited to bring you guys back.

Students are decked out in T-shirts and polos; khakis, jeans, shorts; brand-new sneakers. There's a balloon arch. There's music playing. There's some dancing. Some hugging.

I keep hearing the same thing over and over again.

STUDENT VOICES:

It feels different man

Yeah, all different

It feels different but in a good way

It's gonna be a whole different vibe of like school

What's so different?

Prologue Part 2

Well, back in the day, this place was known as one of the highest-performing schools in the city. And one of the strictest.

Back then, there were no balloon arches on the first day of school. No music or dancing. No T-shirts or jeans or brand-new sneakers.

Instead, students would walk up to this very same entrance and have their uniforms checked. A school-issued polo, tucked in, with at least one button buttoned. Tan khakis, not too tight, not too loose. A plain black belt. Plain black dress shoes. No bracelets. No visible tattoos. No earrings larger than a dime.

If a student was caught with a dress code violation that they could correct—like an untucked polo shirt—they would get one demerit. If a student had a dress code violation they could not correct—like, say, they'd left their belt at home—they would get a detention. Detentions were three hours long. On Friday afternoons. And they cost \$5.00.

The reason I know all of this is because I was one of the people giving the demerits. Before becoming a journalist, I was a teacher here. For seven years.

Back then, this was a no-excuses charter school. The idea was that firm and consistent discipline would eliminate the distractions that often plague struggling schools. Teachers would work relentlessly to close the so-called "achievement gap." And students, almost all of whom were Black or brown and most of whom came from low-income families, would earn access to college.

But since I've been gone, the school has decided that their no excuses approach was not only outdated—it was racist. And so they've thrown it all out—the demerits, the detentions, the uniform—and they're starting over.

STUDENT: So this might be a good year, better than the previous years.

Prologue Part 3

From American Public Media, this is No Excuses. I'm DJ Cashmere.

Over the last year I've been working to make sense of the education reform movement to which I dedicated my 20's. Because it wasn't just this school—it was, and arguably still is, a national movement.

I've interviewed more than 60 people: charter school leaders, principals, teachers, students, parents, academics.

I've made a series of trips back to my old school, reporting on their attempt at total transformation.

But I've also had a more personal mission in mind. Because the thing is, I, too, have been having second thoughts about all of this. About who I was, what I believed in, what I did, how it affected the people around me. Honestly, the folks I most wanted to talk to were the young people I once taught. I wanted to ask them: Was going to a no excuses charter school worth it? How do you remember our time together? How do you feel about how you were treated—about how I treated you?

So I asked them.

DJ: Shall we sit down and relive?

Amari: Yes, let's do it.

DJ: Okay.

And they told me.

Act I Part 1

In April 2009, a year after graduating from college, I joined Teach For America.

ARCHIVAL: NEWS CLIP: For America's poorest public school districts, hiring good teachers can be a difficult task. Which is where a program called Teach for America comes in, the recruitment tool for struggling schools that's attracting record numbers of top college grads

Their pitch was elegant: a simple trade. I would give them two years, and they would give me a chance to change the world.

That spring, President Obama celebrated the fact that –

ARCHIVAL: OBAMA: – 35,000 young people applied for only 4,000 slots in Teach for America.

He said that we were part of a generation of activists...

ARCHIVAL: OBAMA: Possessed with that most American of ideas: that people who love their country can change it.

TFA sent me a pile of spiral-bound training booklets in the mail. They laid out the problem on page one: Eighth-graders from low-income communities were three years behind in math and reading; Twelfth-graders were four years behind; Students from poor families were 17 times less likely to go to college than children from wealthy families.

The solution was to take place in three steps: First, I and my 4,000 fellow corps members would spend the spring internalizing these training materials; second, we'd attend a summer institute where we would take classes and teach for a few hours a week; third, we'd step into some yet-to-be-determined, tragic-but-not-beyond-redemption classroom come fall. There, we would teach some underprivileged kids for a couple of years, and through some alchemy of hard work and determination and general excellence, we would turbo-charge their test scores and rewrite their futures.

Act I Part 2

I got my classroom assignment four days before school started: Jenner Academy. Jenner was not a no-excuses charter. It was a neighborhood elementary school in the Cabrini-Green housing project.

And there I was: A 22-year-old white guy standing in front of a classroom full of Black students—as if the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision I'd learned about in 10th grade civics had been a dream, or a joke. I started drowning immediately.

SCHERGEN: The chaos was so deep at times. And so widespread,

This is Matthias Schergen, better known as Mr. Spider, which was his classroom alias. He was the most respected teacher at Jenner.

SCHERGEN: You couldn't account for what might happen day to day in that building.

Mr. Spider is retired now, after teaching art there for 23 years. He's a winner of the Golden Apple, which is Illinois' big teaching award.

When I called him up recently, he made it clear that it wasn't just me. The place got under your skin.

SCHERGEN: My heart was often always pumping and I did have a shakiness, and describing what that anxiety was, it just became very thick and heavy, the consistency of it inside of me. I could feel it in my chest.

Everything felt chaotic to me, too. My roster kept changing. I couldn't get into the classroom supply closet or filing cabinet. Or my online gradebook. The copying machines didn't work. I didn't have enough paper. My pay kept getting messed up.

And I couldn't manage my classroom. I couldn't even manage to walk my students back from the cafeteria after lunch. In the mornings, I'd wake up early, get in my car, and head south on Lake Shore Drive toward the school, fantasizing about getting into a minor car accident. Nothing serious. Just enough to give me a break for a few days. In the evenings, I'd sometimes cry, and I'd almost always work late.

I felt like I was stuck in the first 20 minutes of every inspirational teacher movie you've ever seen, waiting on a montage that never came. I did not, in fact, turbo-charge my student's test scores.

All of my sixth graders had to take summer school.

Act I Part 3

And then I got an unexpected chance.

NPR Morning Edition from 2008: Imagine an inner city public high school that takes mostly poor students, many of them immigrants, graduates nearly 100 percent of them and sends them to some of the nation's top colleges. You might think it couldn't happen. Well, it does, in Chicago.

While I'd been working at Jenner, a new high school had opened up. It was a campus of the Noble Network of Charter Schools. Noble schools were publicly funded and privately run. And

they all followed a ‘no excuses’ model, which means they relied on strict discipline and rigorous academics to help prepare students for college.

This particular new Noble school was called Chicago Bulls College Prep—named for its founding donor, which was the NBA franchise that played its games down the street.

ARCHIVAL: MOUTHPIECE SPORTS

JILLIAN JESK: The Bulls donated \$2 million to start this Noble Street Charter School, which focuses on scholarship, honor, discipline, and fitness.

Bulls Prep needed a theater teacher. I had majored in theater. I got the job.

The school was just three miles away from Jenner, but it felt like another planet. The hallways were orderly and lined with college banners. The copying machines worked. There was enough paper. My students and I put on sketch comedy shows. We did Shakespeare.

ARCHIVAL: STUDENT:

My fortunes having cast me on your niece, give me this prerogative of speech...

Even though Bulls Prep was super intense about math and English and science, the school valued physical education and the arts, too. But beyond all that, we were also teaching what we called core values.

Like this one time, when my students were juniors, they visited a freshman theater class to provide some pointers—and to perform some sonnets.

One of my students started strong, then started to stumble.

ARCHIVAL:STUDENT:

I love to hear her speak, yet well I know

He gathered himself. Took a deep breath.

ARCHIVAL: STUDENT:

My mistress’s eyes are nothing like the sun

Started over. Got through it. And then it was the next student’s turn: a kid named Josh Hernandez.

But before Josh launched into his sonnet, he celebrated his classmate for showing “No Fear, No Embarrassment.”

ARCHIVAL: JOSH:

... a great example of no fear no embarrassment... ,

This was Bulls Prep-speak for “doing a hard thing even when it’s scary.”

ARCHIVAL: JOSH:

It’s, it’s really tough to you know to get up here in front of all you guys like my heart is going a thousand miles an hour right now but like for him to mess up and then to start over without being embarrassed, like that’s something you guys can learn from.

It would be easy to imagine a high school where if one kid messed up, the other kids would snicker, or jeer. Instead, they were just... patient. And then Josh got up there and celebrated his friend’s bravery. In a genuine, unprompted way. In moments like that, it was impossible not to be proud.

Later that year, Josh and his classmates took the ACT.

The ACT was basically the default college entrance exam. A kid’s score on the ACT was arguably the single most important factor in determining which college they could get into. And so one of our key objectives was to help our students grow their ACT scores as much as they possibly could between the first day of freshman year and the day of the big test junior year.

We would have assemblies where we’d share ACT growth numbers, and if the kids beat their goal, it would sound like this.

ARCHIVAL: SOPHOMORE CLASS:

In 2013, according to the data Bulls Prep staff received at the time, Josh’s class placed third in the entire city in terms of ACT growth. Third. Out of 130 high schools.

Act 1 Part 4

Turbo-charging test scores. Rewriting futures. These were heady times for a teacher like me. Just to give you a sense of what I mean, back in 2011, Teach For America put on a 20th Anniversary Summit in Washington, DC. I was there. Maybe you can hear me cheering for this special surprise video appearance.

ARCHIVAL: OBAMA:

Here in America, we’ve always been a nation of big dreamers. We’ve always found a way to make those dreams a reality. That’s what Wendy Kopp did when she came up with the idea for Teach for America.

A year prior, the documentary *Waiting for Superman* had championed our cause. A year later, there was a pro-ed reform movie starring Viola Davis, Maggie Gyllenhaal, and Oscar Isaac. And here was the President himself, making me feel very good about my life choices.

ARCHIVAL: OBAMA:

That's why I'm encouraging every young person who wants to make a difference in the life of our nation to follow your example and become a teacher.

Being at the summit was like visiting the mothership. There were people there from Bulls Prep, and from all across Noble, and from other no excuses charter schools around the country, all of which seemed to be growing and thriving. I felt like I was a part of something so much bigger than myself. Like I was at the nexus of a broad and historic bipartisan consensus, the cutting edge of a 21st-Century Civil Rights Movement. It seemed like the whole culture had our backs.

In fact, for the summit's grand finale, a bunch of students from a no excuses charter school—actually, let me just let this guy do it.

ARCHIVAL - JOHN LEGEND & KIPP ORCHESTRA SUMMIT PERFORMANCE:

Ladies and gentlemen! The Kipp Orchestra, featuring grammy award winning artist and Teach for America board member John Legend!

I guess what I'm trying to say is... Yes, I was oozing Kool-Aid out of every pore. But I wasn't the only one.

Act I Part 5

Between 2006 and 2016, Noble grew from one single high school to seventeen high schools and a middle school. It now enrolls one out of every ten high school students in Chicago.

But the bigger it got, the more criticism it drew.

WBUR HERE AND NOW APRIL 2014

We've been hearing about the push by civil rights groups and the Obama administration to end so-called zero tolerance discipline policies in schools.

FEB 2012 CBS CHICAGO

Invest in us, stop arresting us. Invest in us, stop arresting us.

At charter schools, run by the Noble Network, students who are disciplined for even minor infractions can be sent to detention, something that costs \$5 each time. And after repeated offenses can be required to attend behavior classes at a cost of up to \$280.

WBUR HERE AND NOW APRIL 2014

23 percent of students were suspended in 2013. That's compared to 9 percent suspended at public schools

NBC Chicago 2017

She says she was banned from class because she colored her hair the wrong shade of red.

I've never done anything wrong. I just painted my hair.

FEB 2012 CBS CHICAGO

Critics call the noble discipline code predatory and punitive and say it's counterproductive.

To the critics, we were just a bunch of non-union teachers policing the bodies of Black and brown students and forcing their families to pay us money whenever they ran afoul of our draconian rules.

To make matters worse, they said we were skimming the most motivated kids into our schools, thereby diverting them, their engaged families, and their per-pupil funding allotment away from already under-resourced neighborhood schools.

And to top it all off, they said we were counseling out kids that couldn't cut it by piling on detentions and holding them back from moving on to the next grade until they finally gave up and transferred out, thus making our lives easier and our test scores even higher.

The whole thing was nothing more than a neoliberal attack on public education, funded by the 1%.

And I started to wonder if maybe the critics had a point.

Act I Part 6

In my sixth year at Noble, I started co-teaching a cultural studies class with one of my colleagues.

CHRISTINE: My name's Christine Peralta. I worked at Bulls for eight school years.

Christine and I were very different. I was a white kid from the East Coast suburbs whose ancestors had emigrated from Europe a hundred-plus years ago. She was a daughter of Filipino immigrants and had been born and raised in Chicago. She had a master's in educational psychology and had studied some of the subjects we were going to be tackling in cultural studies.

CHRISTINE: And I think you just were like, you should teach this class with me. And I was like, I should teach the class with you.

I had never shared my classroom with another teacher before. And soon enough, she was calling me out.

Like this one afternoon, our students were doing a practice ACT Reading test. One of them, a kid who was generally pretty hard working, rushed through the test and then put his head down. This was totally uncharacteristic, and totally unacceptable.

CHRISTINE: Yeah, and then you gave him four demerits.,

DJ: Which is a detention.

CHRISTINE: Which is three hours after school on a Friday. And he was pissed and I was pissed. I didn't know you were going to do that. Um, he left. I'm like, you can't give him detention. Uh, I was really mad. And then I'm like, you need to go find out what happened. Like why he's obviously not just putting his head down because he doesn't care. Like he obviously cares. Like something's up.

She and I argued, briefly. But I relented. I tracked down the student and asked what had happened. He said he was having trouble concentrating because his family was about to be evicted. I apologized. I revoked the detention. I also told him I needed him to give his best in class. And he bounced back. He had a really strong year.

I came to realize I'd been approaching my students with a vague sense of suspicion. And I was stunned to see how differently things went when I consciously opted for trust instead. Like this other afternoon, during a period of silent reading, I noticed a student who was not reading. Instead, she was writing on a piece of paper. In previous years, I would've instantly given her a demerit for being off-task. But this time, I kept my mouth shut and wandered nonchalantly over to her desk. It was true that she was not, at that moment, reading her chosen book, which was *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. But that was because she had paused to write down a series of thoughtful notes and reflections about the text. Not for an assignment. Just for herself. She was probably the most on-task student in the room. So I just let her be. Kept walking.

As the year progressed, I started checking in with kids the moment something seemed off. Christine and I started class with a meditation, to settle in, and an open-ended discussion time in case anyone needed to ask anything, or share anything.

And they did. We'd be working on a reading about police violence or sexual assault, and kid after kid would offer a brilliant observation. Or a sincere question. Or they'd be like, "Oh. Is this like that thing that happened to me?"

CHRISTINE: Just like stories that are in our kids obviously everyday that they don't always have the space to talk about. It's always how I felt growing up and how I felt even at Bulls being a non-white person on staff and not always having shared experiences with the white staff members.

DJ: What's always how you felt?

CHRISTINE: Just, like, I don't know if there's space and time for my sto—my, like, true stories here. But in that cultural studies class, it felt like every time a kid shared a thing about their life that they didn't know they could talk about there was like a sense of relief there.

I started figuring out how to both hold high expectations *and* provide a high level of support. To create a curriculum that was both difficult *and* relevant. And to have conversations that were both cathartic *and* healing. Everything changed: the way I set up my classroom, the way I calculated grades, the way I spoke. It was like I'd spent the last five years trying to push kids up a hill with all my might, and then all of a sudden I stopped and said, "Hey. This is a steep hill. Can I walk with you?"

And they said yes. They stayed late in our room to work on their homework. They came into school on the weekends to study. They crushed their ACT Reading test.

CHEERING

Act I Part 7

But I had never really intended teaching to be my career. So I applied to journalism school and got into NYU. Meanwhile, Christine and I started dating. She got a teaching job in the South Bronx, and in 2017, we moved to New York, and got married, leaving Noble, and our 20s, behind.

Act I Part 8

But as the years passed, I found I couldn't stop thinking about Bulls Prep. So in the fall of 2020, I called up some of my former students and asked them: What if I made a documentary about

my time in the classroom? More specifically, what if I interviewed you about your time in my classroom?

And they said, “Yeah, go for it. We’ve got some thoughts.”

MANNY: You gave me a detention, ‘cause you said I “lied to you.”

(Laughter)

RAYLAN : I was like I’ll do the bare minimum to get by. That’s it. You’re not getting any more out of me.

Coming up: I fly back to Chicago to hear from my former students; and Noble turns it back on 20 years of No Excuses.

This is APM. American Public Media.

END ACT I

Act II Part 1

Welcome back. You're listening to No Excuses, a documentary from American Public Media. I'm DJ Cashmere.

It's now been half a decade since I was a teacher in a no excuses charter school, but I still think about that experience all the time. So last year, I started reaching out to my former students. I sent texts and Facebook messages. I asked them if they wanted to talk about what it felt like to be on the other end of all that education reform—and how they felt about me. Some didn't want to talk. But some did.

MARIA: I'm back in your classroom. I'm like, picturing you with your little notebook, just like, writing down names. (laughter)

This is one of my former students, Maria Garcia.

MARIA: Oh, that notebook. You had a lot of those, remember?

I do remember. They were these pocket-sized tan-colored Moleskines I used to carry around to keep track of all the demerits and homework detentions I was handing out each day.

Maria started as a student at Bulls the same year I started as a teacher. My first memories amount to a years-long honeymoon phase. Hers—not so much. Take, for example, orientation.

MARIA: I remember we walked in and they're doing a uniform check and I'm freaking out checking everything. Do I have X, Y, and Z? Yes, yes, yes. And they get to my shoes. You don't have socks on, you can not come in without socks on. Oh, my gosh. I was so mad. Why can I not go in without socks? Thank God, my mom had an extra pair of socks in her car. She just sprints to the car and thinking about it it's making me a little emotional because like you're already so overwhelmed by everything that is to come, right? Like your high school experience. And I remember my mom doing a lot to make sure that I was ready and we forgot the socks. The stinkin' socks. But we get the socks and put them on. They said, "You're good to go." But I feel like I still remember that day, like if it was yesterday and it still makes me upset.

The rationale for the uniform rules always boiled down to professionalism—or at least, Noble's definition of professionalism. And while the rules could seem arbitrary, the focus on professionalism also had some upside. For example, Maria is now a social worker. And she told me that, as a woman of color moving in predominantly white professional spaces, she draws confidence from the firm handshake she learned at Bulls.

MARIA: I remember shaking the branch director's hand and him being like, "Wow, you have a really nice handshake." Thank you. "Firm eye contact." Yup. I'm not intimidated by you.

Still, a lot of students said that acting the way we wanted them to act all day long took a toll.

AMARI: It was very exhausting. It started the moment I walked in the front doors.

This is Amari Smith. Amari and I met up in an empty office at Bulls Prep. She told me that before high school, most of her teachers had been Black, and she'd felt free to be herself at school. But when she got to Bulls, most of her teachers were white. And we had all these new rules for her, from what she wore to how loud she spoke in the hallways to the grammatical structure of her sentences. She didn't feel free to be herself; she learned to put on a mask.

AMARI: My thought throughout the entire day was I don't want to get in trouble. I don't want to get in trouble. I don't want to get in trouble. I don't want a demerit. I don't want to be late for class. I don't want to do this. It was so mentally exhausting to constantly be tense. I was tense.

I heard this over and over in my interviews with alumni: that they'd felt tense, exhausted, anxious, ashamed, surveilled. I hadn't wanted them to feel that way.

But I also realized that I could, to some degree, relate. Because I'd been under surveillance, too. I was constantly being judged on my ability to manage my students' behavior. And so I developed this terrible habit of taking their actions personally.

MANNY: There were, like, a few instances where I'm just like, oh, Mr. Cashmere is being petty, so I'm gonna be petty.

This is Emmanuel Leal. Back in the day, we called him Manny. In one of these instances, Manny had signed up to help out after school with set construction for an upcoming play.

MANNY: You were like, "Oh yeah, you're going to be there later today, right?" And without really thinking, I was like, "Yeah, sure. I'm going to be there." And then I wasn't, cause I had to go to work.

Apparently, I addressed this the next day.

MANNY: And so you're like, oh, you lied to me. That's four demerits, you have detention. Boom.

DJ: I gave you a detention for that?

MANNY: You gave me a detention. Cause you said I lied to you.

DJ: Oh man. That's so embarrassing.

The Code of Conduct had a lot of subjective gray area. For example, a teacher could give anywhere between one and four demerits for “disrespect.” That’s probably what I did in this case. Four demerits for disrespect. Which, I mean. Just a completely ridiculous way to have handled that.

I called up another alum, Raylan Grace, because I had a vivid memory of messing up with him. I wasn’t sure if he’d be down to talk to me, but he was.

DJ: I remember you and I specifically had kind of a tough moment after the ACT. Do you remember this? Do you remember what I’m talking about?

RAYLAN: Yeah, I remember.

(DJ laughs awkwardly.)

It was late in the school year. The day of the big test. The ACT was long. It had a math, English, reading, and science section. After it was over, the principal gathered all the juniors in the auditorium for a moment of reflection on all their hard work. Somewhere along the line, the principal asked if anyone wanted to say anything. Raylan raised his hand.

RAYLAN: I said, “Man, I don’t know about y’all, but I fell asleep on that reading part.” I said that as a joke and it got people laughing cause it was awkward and we were all just tired and ready to go.

The idea of sleeping during the reading section of the test did not strike me as funny, in part because I was accountable for the reading scores. (Again, taking things personally.) So the next time Raylan came to my class, I told him his comment was a big “F you” to all the hard work that we’d all done together to get our ACT reading scores up. I said this in front of everyone. And I used the actual “F” word.

Meanwhile, Raylan was making a quick set of mental calculations. On the one hand, he felt attacked.

RAYLAN: And I’m just like, yeah, I’m supposed to sit here and be disrespected when you tell us to be respectful to you. Um, I don’t know about that.

But on the other hand, he was getting ready to go on a school trip to Italy, and he didn’t want to get in trouble and jeopardize the opportunity.

RAYLAN: I had to behave, so I smiled, because if I showed any other emotion, I was scared you might kick me out.

I actually got a talking-to from my principal about this incident. And I even, according to Raylan, tried to patch things up with him after. But he wasn't having it. The relationship that we'd had was gone for the rest of the year.

RAYLAN: I was like, I'll do the bare minimum to get by. That's it. You're not getting any more out of me.

He may not have been a fan of me personally, but when I asked Raylan whether he'd make the same choice if he had it to do over again - whether he'd go back to Bulls - he didn't hesitate.

RAYLAN: Yes. I would.

DJ: No question.

RAYLAN: No. Bulls had more than other schools did at the time.

He even said the strict discipline system had helped him, because he'd needed to learn how to respect people. After graduation, Raylan did some college, and is now attending culinary school, pursuing his dream of becoming a chef.

There's a pattern here with Manny and Raylan: I would immediately feel tense when my students did something I didn't like. And rather than just have a conversation with them about it, I would criticize, or punish.

That's why that one moment has stuck with me: When my student was writing during silent reading time, and I almost gave her a demerit. It was a moment where I didn't fall into that pattern.

I wound up telling the story of that moment to Amari Smith during our interview. Amari is actually a teacher now—at Noble. I explained to her how humbling that afternoon still is.

DJ: And I think about that moment of like how many times in the five years prior, did I give that kid in that instance, the demerit –

Amari: Mmm...

DJ: – and lose the relationship.

Amari: Mm hm.

DJ: They either speak up and they get an extra demerit or they really speak up and they get kicked out or they don't say anything and they swallow it and now I'm persona non grata in that kid's life forever.

Amari: Mm hm.

DJ: There is no way I would be able to count how many kids that was true of.

AMARI: For me, especially now that I'm working in education, I wish you would've learned that sooner.

Me, too.

I asked Amari why she'd agreed to sit down and talk to me in the first place. Given all of her objections about her high school experience, why not just go the burning bridges route?

AMARI: Um... then I wouldn't be free. I would still be living in hurt and I've learned you cannot live in hurt. You can't live in your trauma. I am not responsible for my trauma, but I am definitely responsible for how I heal from it. Learning to forgive people for what they've done or how they have impacted my life. That's helped me forgive myself for not having the voice to speak up.

Another student who felt he hadn't spoken up was Josh Hernandez. He's the one you heard earlier giving his classmate an impromptu shout-out for showing No Fear, No Embarrassment. In my mind, Josh had been a Bulls Prep poster child. Elite athlete, honors student, respected leader.

DJ: You ready to do this?

JOSH: Yeah.

DJ: Okay.

Josh: I'm ready.

Josh and I met up outside his childhood home on the southwest side of Chicago. Out of the hundreds of students I taught, Josh may have been the one I knew best. He had been in my advisory, meaning he'd come to my classroom a minimum of twice a day, every day, throughout all four years of high school. I knew his two younger brothers, I knew his parents, I'd eaten his mom's delicious Puerto Rican rice.

DJ: Do you want to just tell me a little bit about life in this house during high school?

JOSH: Yeah. Man. Tough topic to start off with, but...

Turns out I didn't know Josh as well as I thought.

JOSH: The last two years I lived in this house, we didn't have any heat, so there was no gas. We went weeks with no electricity. Some nights, um, didn't really have much food.

He said this was hard to talk about, because he had good parents, and they'd worked hard. But midway through high school, over about a five-month stretch, there were three deaths in the family, and things started to fall apart.

Other than the deaths in the family, I don't remember knowing any of this.

JOSH: We went through it here, you know? But no, I don't think anyone knew that in high school, you know, showering out of buckets and no, no electricity here.

So finding ways to do my homework, charge my phone. Can't have an alarm clock if you don't have electricity. So things like that.

We walked away from the house with a destination in mind: Bulls Prep. The idea was that Josh was going to take me along on what used to be his daily commute, showing me what things had actually looked like through his eyes. We got on a city bus, then a train, then another bus.

As we started getting closer to the school, Josh said he was feeling a heavy weight on his shoulders.

JOSH: I just feel like my, my chest is really tight and I'm very.... It's like, I can't breathe. I'm very anxious. It's so weird. I hate that I'm like this because I don't like to feel weak. And it makes me feel weak and vulnerable, you know?

When we got to Bulls Prep, Josh took a few minutes to walk around outside and gather his thoughts. Then we went in. Set up in an empty office. And he told me the story of his first detention.

It happened junior year. Josh was hanging out in a classroom after school before the start of an athletics practice, and his phone rang. It was his mom calling. But phones were not allowed to be visible or audible. So rather than letting Josh answer it, his coach confiscated his phone and gave him the automatic consequence required by the Student Code of Conduct: four demerits, which equated to one detention.

JOSH: My mom knows where I'm at. So if she's calling me, something's going on. And I knew my grandma was in the hospital right here at Rush.

Rush is the Rush University Medical Center, just down the street from Bulls. So when the coach left the classroom to let the boys change their clothes for practice—Bulls doesn't have any locker rooms—Josh picked up the room's landline and called his mom back.

JOSH: And my mom was like, you know, “You need to skip practice because your grandma’s not gonna make it to, till after practice.” So I got my stuff and I left with no phone and my parents had to come pick it up the next day.

JOSH: But the fact that, if I didn’t do that, I would have never gotten a chance to say goodbye to my grandma. Like I could never get that back, you know?

DJ: Did she die that night?

JOSH: Yeah, she, she literally, I got there. I said, bye. And she took her last breath.

Josh’s dad came the next day to pick up his cell phone and explain the situation. Josh still had to serve the detention. And he did.

JOSH: I was so mad at myself, because why, why didn’t I speak up? You know? I did a lot for the school, and I was one of the students that was a good student. And if I would’ve spoke up, maybe I could have changed something.

Josh did do a lot for the school. And he acknowledged that the school did a lot for him, too. Like this one time, when he was in college, he needed to take some summer classes if he wanted to graduate with his bachelor’s on time. But he couldn’t afford them. So, he told me, he called up Bulls Prep, and the school just straight up paid a couple thousand dollars on his behalf.

Josh is a teacher now, too—though not at Noble. In fact, he says when something happens in his classroom, he thinks about what his teachers at Bulls would’ve done, then does the opposite. And when I asked him what he’d do if he could make his high school decision all over again, he was unequivocal.

JOSH: I’d go to a different school, hundred percent.

Of course, a lot of students hadn’t had a choice about going to Bulls in the first place. Amari Smith, for example, told me that her mom, Rashane Times, had made the decision. So I called Mrs. Times. And Mrs. Times made it clear that she knew what she was choosing when she chose Bulls Prep. Back then, the school was still pretty new, but she’d heard a little bit about it from a fellow parent.

TIMES: I remember her telling me her kid used to go home crying, because of the rules, and things like that. And I was like, “OK! I’m in! If they’re making kids cry, I’m in!”
(laughter)

Mrs. Times told me that, as a Black single parent, there were “generational curses” that she’d wanted to break. But she couldn’t do it by herself.

TIMES: I needed more help in raising these kids.

So she turned to Bulls. And it worked. In addition to teaching at Noble Amari is currently pursuing a master's degree. Amari's younger brother, who Mrs. Times also sent to Bulls Prep, is now a U.S. Marine.

Act II Part 2

Of course, all of this is anecdotal. But there's some pretty rigorous scientific evidence backing Noble's no excuses model, too.

Parag Pathak is a Professor of Economics at MIT. He and his colleagues have studied no excuses charter schools in Chicago, New Orleans, Boston, and Denver.

PATHAK: Charter schools that are of this particular high expectations model across all of the sites, using really the most rigorous research design, consistently produce impressive results on standardized test scores and college going.

Pathak and his colleagues have actually studied Noble specifically. A few years back, they looked at a big group of eighth-grade students who had applied for a seat at Noble. (When a Noble campus has more applicants than it does seats, there's a lottery to determine who gets in.) Pathak and his team then tracked the students who got in and those who didn't. What they found was that attending Noble increased college-going rates by 20 percentage points.

Pathak and his team also found that attending Noble increased students' ACT Math scores by so much that, over the course of a student's freshman, sophomore, and junior year, the Black-white achievement gap doesn't just close—it disappears entirely.

PATHAK: Overall, you know, Noble and schools like Noble are a pretty important thing in social policy. It's very hard to find interventions that move the needle to this degree on these kinds of outcomes.

Act II Part 3

Now, you could certainly argue that test scores shouldn't be the most important measure of a school's success. And that college-going shouldn't be, either, especially since, even though most Noble graduates do enroll in college, most do not graduate.

You could also argue that these numbers are beside the point. That no statistic could ever justify the stress and shame and harm many students experienced at Bulls, and across all of Noble's schools.

And in fact, if you argued that, Noble's current leadership would agree with you.

Act II Part 4

Back in 2018, the year after I left the classroom, Noble's co-founder and CEO, a white man named Michael Milkie, abruptly retired after allegations surfaced of inappropriate interactions with female alumni.¹²

WBEZ 2018: Two top female leaders confronted Milkie last month about a pattern of inappropriate behavior.

One of those leaders was Constance Jones. Jones is a Black woman. She has an MBA from Harvard. When Milkie stepped down, she was promoted to CEO.

JONES: I saw this crisis and I was like: How can we emerge as a better organization?

Jones quickly eliminated three of the network's long-standing policies: the rules governing student hairstyles, the rule against students and staff having visible tattoos, and the rule requiring students to have a staff escort to go to the bathroom during class.

Jones told me that that last one frightened a lot of people at Noble.

JONES: I mean, I've never seen so many tears from people, staff, scared: Kids are gonna run the hallways. You know, there'll be massive fights in the bathrooms. These are things people told me, tears running down their face. But then through changing a policy, we were able to change mindsets, cause guess what. Those things didn't happen.

Constance Jones started setting up teams to tackle what she saw as Noble's biggest problems. This meant that leaders from across the network had to answer questions that critics of no excuses charters had been asking for years. Like, "Why are so many students transferring out of Noble?" and "What is going on with our Black boys? Why are we giving them more demerits, detentions, and suspensions than their peers? Why are they being held back, and even expelled, at disproportionately high rates?"

Then George Floyd was murdered, and Constance Jones publicly committed Noble to becoming an antiracist organization. Which meant that, suddenly, Noble's shortcomings had a name, according to Noble: racism.

Here's how Jones put it in a letter to staff she co-authored in February 2021:

1

<https://www.wbez.org/stories/chicago-charter-leader-investigated-for-inappropriate-contact-with-young-women/b41ce324-ce9c-4b9f-8f45-5013845034e9>

2

<https://chicago.chalkbeat.org/2018/11/13/21106117/inappropriate-behavior-with-alumni-led-to-noble-founder-s-resignation-charter-leaders-tell-staff>

“We used our policies and practices to force an assimilationist, patriarchal, white supremacist, and anti-Black culture onto our students. We were disguising punishment as accountability and high expectation.”

Jones and other network leaders started asking students, staff, alumni, and parents what needed to change. If the old way was racist, then what did people think antiracism should look like?

In June 2021, Jones released a video with an answer:

JONES VIDEO: Our work this spring pushed us to reimagine a Noble without a demerit system altogether.

No excuses was over. The demerits, detentions, and uniforms were all gone. Taking their place would be

JONES VIDEO: restorative practices, interventions, social-emotional learning, and more parent communication and partnership.

Jones was rolling out all these changes just as Noble was about to welcome students back after over a year of mostly-remote learning. The stakes were high. Noble serves roughly 10 percent of Chicago’s high school students. And, as Jones explained to me-Noble has long been a leader in the charter movement, and so other charter leaders were watching closely to see if they could pull this off.

JONES: So it’s a huge responsibility. We gotta get this right, not just for our 12,700 students, but for hundreds of thousands, millions of students across this country whose leaders are watching and waiting and learning and evolving alongside us.

But she also knew that not everyone was on board.

JONES: Some people just don't like change. Some people would never say this, but you see it in their actions and their words: Some people are scared of our kids. And so, lifting these systems of power and control is very scary for them.

Still, when I got to Bulls Prep on the first day of school, in September 2021, that hopeful feeling that everything was going to be different seemed almost universal.

STUDENT: So this might be a good year. Better than the previous years.

But then the school year started, and it was tough.

Cell Phones, which had previously been banned, were now a massive distraction at Noble's schools. Tardies, which had long been suppressed by automatic demerits, were now through the roof. And physical violence on campus, which had been pretty rare, quickly became commonplace. In fact, a month into the school year, Bulls Prep, long known for its commitment to safety and discipline, made the news in a way I never would have imagined.

NEWS MONTAGE

CBS: New tonight, three teens stabbed during a fight outside of Chicago Bulls College Prep.

ABC: Witnesses telling us school had just ended when a group of about 12-15 students started arguing outside of the main entrance

CBS: Police say up to fifteen people were fighting on the sidewalk this afternoon.

I had a trip planned to visit Chicago a couple weeks later. But when I got to Bulls, there were no classes in session. Campuses were in such disarray that Noble had taken a one-week "fall pause" to regroup.

I checked in with staff members I'd known for years, like Roberto Rosado. Rosado works on the Culture Team—which used to be called the Discipline Team. He's the longest-tenured staff member at Bulls, and a true believer. He has even sent his own kids to Noble schools.

Rosado and I sat down in an empty room in the mostly empty building. And he told me Bulls was no longer the place he used to brag about.

ROSADO: I felt personally that we lowered our standard to meet our kids, instead of letting our kids meet us in a high standard.

Whether you liked it or not, the old standard had been easy to understand. Whereas the new standard... well, no one seemed to know what the new standard was. Later that week, Constance Jones addressed the network on a Zoom call. She acknowledged that Noble had not given teachers clear instructions on how to replace the demerit system.

JONES VIDEO #2: But to be clear, we are not going back to demerits or a similar quick and swift approach. We will never go back to the days of children raising their arms for a dress code check, or being escorted by an adult just to use the restroom. We will not go back to watching students sit in detention, copying the code of conduct, or to the days when thousands of students left Noble to find a different school experience, when we know we can do better.

I flew out to Chicago to visit Bulls Prep again a few months later, in February 2022.

The students I spoke with said they felt more free now.

STUDENT 1: Now we can express ourself more freely and people can see like, you know, our creative styles,

STUDENT 3: They trusting us to just do the right thing, you know, make this school a better place.

But they also said the freedom had a downside.

STUDENT 4: I feel like before there was a lot of respect and a lot of discipline, but now that there's no rules and there's not as strict, then people, like, they forget about, like, respecting the adults and respecting each other.

STUDENT 5: I don't think they should have changed the rules, honestly, because now there's ruckus everywhere.

STUDENT 6: It kind of became a little bit harder to learn.

STUDENT 7: I don't think some of the kids in here feel safe.

STUDENT 8: It's chaos now.

Much like the old days, I saw most kids doing exactly what they were supposed to be doing. What felt different, though, was that when a kid did something they weren't supposed to be doing, the misbehavior was often ignored.

I didn't see any fights, but I heard about a few that had happened recently. One had been bad enough that the principal, Mark Hamstra, said they'd needed to make a rare call for police support—only to find that the police were already busy at other local high schools.

HAMSTRA: We called and they said there was a, there was a brawl at Wells and a brawl at Crane and we've got no one left. And I guess those brawls were worse than my brawls.

Lots of schools saw an uptick in violence this past year. Across the country, after all those months of Zoom school, there have been reports of schools struggling with everything from so-called "learning loss," to student mental health challenges, to teacher shortages. And then there's all the trauma and violence outside the school, as well. In fact, during the 2021-2022 school year, Noble says it lost four students to gun violence.

In February 2022, an internal analysis of staff survey data found that Noble employees' happiness and satisfaction had plummeted.

In March, a report on Noble's discipline data showed that Black students, especially Black boys, were still being suspended at disproportionately high rates.

In June, the big end-of-year standardized test data came in. Noble students don't take the ACT anymore—they now take the SAT. And the SAT scores were the worst they've ever been.

But there was an open debate about why. Was it because too much had changed? Or maybe the changes were the right ones, but they'd happened too quickly? Or there hadn't been enough training? Maybe the real problem was the pandemic? Or just people's impatience with the discomfort that comes with change?

Terrence Pruitt is a former Noble employee who has been working for the network as an outside consultant on its antiracist commitment. When I talked to him in March of 2022, he argued that the change was *supposed* to be messy, and that if Noble had taken 20 years to build and refine its old model, then it would be ridiculous to judge the new model after only a handful of months.

PRUITT: Those that seek to change the system, they are often muted. And the easiest way to mute them is to say, "Look, we started, we tried. We tried for a little bit and it didn't work. So let's go back to what we've always been doing."

Noble's leaders told me they're not going back to no excuses. But some of them also said that they may not have the resources to pull off antiracism, either. Ellen Metz, Noble's Head of Schools, pointed to a lack of funding, staffing, training, and facilities across the network.

METZ: I'm so proud of, like, our philosophical stance and I'm so proud of our commitment to be this, you know, this anti-racist institution. But my biggest fear is that we're just, like, saying and doing things that make us feel good. But if it does not have a profoundly positive impact on outcome, then what are we doing? So. That's like where I feel despair. Because the conditions haven't changed.

Here are some of the conditions at Bulls: There are no locker rooms. There is no proper theater or athletics field. Some teachers work from desks that are shoved into a corner of an abandoned track above the school's tiny gymnasium, which itself doubles as a second cafeteria. There is no school nurse. There are not enough social workers. There isn't even reliable heat in the winter.

But, resources or not, the kids keep coming. And so the search for the right mix of policies continues. In June 2022, Metz co-authored a letter to Noble staff listing some changes for the upcoming school year. Among them: Cell phones will no longer be allowed to be visible or audible. And there will be a uniform.

Coda

Back when I used to work at Bulls Prep, we talked about accountability all the time. Staff were accountable for test scores and student behavior. Students were accountable for being on time

and being in uniform and having their homework done. But for the most part, accountability was hierarchical. You were held accountable by the people who had power over you.

One of the reasons I set out to report this story is that I was curious to see what a more expansive version of accountability might look like. What might it mean for me to be accountable to my former students? What might it mean for Noble to be accountable to the community it serves?

I still think these are important questions. And I don't think they're enough.

Because, for schools to truly exist in an ecosystem of mutual accountability, Noble would have to be able to hold Chicago accountable for its segregation and violence. To hold America accountable for its inequities and inaction.

True accountability would mean that our students would get to tell us how we're failing them. And we would listen. And we would do something about it.

Credits

You've been listening to No Excuses. I'm DJ Cashmere. Our editor is Catherine Winter. Our Associate Producer is Anna Canny. Consulting Editor Alden Lory of WBEZ Chicago. Music and sound design by Chris Julin. Engineering by Craig Thorson. Web editor Andy Kruse. Fact checking by Betsy Towner Levine. Thanks to Neel Dhanesha, Sean Mayes, Dan Harris, Stephen Cashmere, Christine Peralta, Chris Worthington, Lauren Humpert, Dave Mann, Madeleine Baran, Samara Freemark, and Sasha Aslanian. Support for this program comes from Lumina Foundation and the Spencer Foundation. This is APM, American Public Media.