

**Joanne W. Golann, *Scripting the Moves: Culture and Control in a “No-Excuses” Charter School* (Princeton University Press, 2021)**

Book Excerpt 2

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“So the s is for ‘sitting up straight,’” Ms. Anderson, a thirty-one-year-old White teacher with curly, shoulder-length hair and glasses, announced to the students in a clear, crisp voice.<sup>1</sup> She folded her hands together, with her fingers interlaced. “What I’m not doing is sitting like this,” she demonstrated, pretending to slouch back in a chair. “Like this,” she said, straightening her back. “Try to sit all the way up. Relax your shoulders now.” The crop of new Black and Latino fifth graders, seated “crisscross, applesauce” in eight straight rows on the cafeteria floor, mimicked her positions.<sup>2</sup> “I don’t have all eyes,” Ms. Anderson prompted. Then, she continued on with L for “listening,” A for “ask questions,” N for “nod for understanding,” and T for “track the speaker.”

Pointing her two fingers to her eyes, she demonstrated how students should keep their eyes on the speaker. “I should naturally see your eyes following me,” she instructed, as she paced around the front of the room. “To make it even better, you can add a little smile.” As the students’ mouths curled up in smiles, the nervousness in the air seemed to lighten.

“Why do we SLANT? It shows respect. Posture is everything. If I’m sitting like this, it doesn’t look academic.” She leaned backward on her chair. “SLANTing makes you look and feel smart. It also allows the blood to circulate to the brain more. It lets you listen and absorb and retain. It helps you prepare for the real world. I can’t go to my job, my mom can’t go to her job, my husband can’t go to his job without paying attention.”

Here, on the first day of school at Dream Academy, a “no-excuses” school, I observed a lesson in how to pay attention. I was not taken aback by this lesson. In fact, I had decided to immerse myself as a researcher in the school for the year precisely because I was interested in lessons like these.

I first became interested in no-excuses schools—the name given to a number of high-performing urban schools, including KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program), Success Academy, Uncommon Schools, YES Prep, and Achievement First—when I heard about SLANT. I was struck by its explicitness—it translated middle-class expectations for showing attention into a simple acronym. I nod (a lot) when I engage in conversation, but I certainly do not remember ever having been taught to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> To protect the confidentiality of the respondents, all names used in the book are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> I capitalize “Black” to recognize the identity of Black people as a racial group. I also capitalize “White.” I use “Latino/a” instead of “Latinx,” as these were the terms used by students and staff.

## Golann, *Scripting the Moves* • NCSPE Book Excerpt

When I started studying sociology as a graduate student, I was drawn to the concept of cultural capital because I recognized the importance of cultural know-how in getting ahead. Cultural capital comprises the cultural attitudes, skills, knowledge, and behaviors that give certain groups advantages in institutional settings.<sup>3</sup> It can be thought of as the “taken-for-granted ways of being that are valued in a particular context.”<sup>4</sup> As a daughter of Chinese immigrants, I had observed cultural differences between the deferent manner in which I approached my professors and the casual style in which my graduate school peers interacted with faculty, or in how I stumbled through an explanation while my husband, who grew up in an affluent neighborhood, always sounded like he was giving a lecture. I wondered if my peers’ seemingly natural ability to make small talk or articulate an argument could be learned.

To be a successful student requires a lot of background knowledge, not just about facts and figures, but also about what is appropriate to say and do. Sociologists of education have argued that schools operate under a set of middle-class, White (dominant) norms that favor children who have acquired the requisite social, cultural, and linguistic competencies at home.<sup>5</sup> For children whose knowledge, skills, and behaviors do not match those expected in the classroom, school can be a disorienting experience. These students can have their actions and intentions misinterpreted by teachers and school administrators, particularly by those whose backgrounds differ from their own.<sup>6</sup> Teachers’ perceptions of students have consequences for students’ academic achievement, as teachers assign higher grades to those who display skills like attention, engagement, and organization and, conversely, have lower expectations for, and give poorer evaluations to, students whom they view as disruptive, dressed “inappropriately,” and lazy.<sup>7</sup> As misunderstandings multiply, young children may come to unconsciously sense that school is not a place for them, and adolescents may actively resist school.<sup>8</sup>

As a sociologist, I had read many studies about the role that cultural capital played in shaping students’ experiences and outcomes in school, but I had seen few studies that looked at whether or how this cultural know-how could be taught. That’s why I was intrigued when I heard about SLANT. It literally spelled out what students needed to do to conform to school expectations for showing attention—they needed to sit up, listen, ask questions, nod for understanding, and track the speaker. I thought it was clever. Intrigued, I decided to see for myself how and why no excuses schools were teaching students to SLANT and whether they were successfully

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<sup>3</sup> Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu coined the term “cultural capital.” Cultural capital has been defined by scholars in numerous ways. For a helpful review, see Lamont and Lareau, “Cultural Capital”; Lareau and Weininger, “Cultural Capital in Educational Research.”

<sup>4</sup> This definition of cultural capital is taken from Jack, *Privileged Poor*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu, “School as a Conservative Force”; Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control*; Giroux, *Theory and Resistance in Education*.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander, Entwisle, and Thompson, “School Performance, Status Relations, and the Structure of Sentiment”; Dee, “Teacher like Me”; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell, “Race, Cultural Capital, and Educational Resources.”

<sup>7</sup> Farkas et al., “Cultural Resources and School Success”; Farkas, “Cognitive Skills and Noncognitive Traits”; Ferguson, *Bad Boys*; Tyson, “Notes from the Back of the Room”; Jennings and DiPrete, “Teacher Effects on Social and Behavioral Skills.”

<sup>8</sup> Streib, “Class Reproduction by Four Year Olds”; Willis, *Learning to Labour*.

transferring cultural capital to the predominantly low-income Black and Latino students they served.

Yet the more time I spent inside Dream Academy, the more I wondered whether Dream Academy's rigid behavioral *scripts* equipped students with the *tools* to successfully navigate middle-class institutions. To teach what the school considered "middle-class" behaviors, Dream Academy used *scripts*, which I define as detailed and standardized behavioral codes or procedures. Students at Dream Academy were given exhaustive scripts for how to dress, how to complete a homework assignment, and how to clap in an assembly. They were given scripts for how to walk down the hallways and how to sit at their desks. They were given scripts for how to interact with teachers—no eye-rolling, no teeth sucking, no refusing a teacher's directions, and no talking back, even if wrongly accused. The rigid scripts students were taught to follow, however, left little room for them to develop what I call *tools of interaction*, or the attitudes, skills, and styles that allow certain groups to effectively navigate complex institutions and shifting expectations. Would the behavioral scripts the school worked so hard to teach transfer to a different setting? As students reached the targeted goal of college, would they be able to adjust to a less structured environment? Or had no-excuses schools like Dream Academy, in their eagerness to get students to the college door, inadvertently failed to prepare students with the cultural capital they would need for life success and upward social mobility?

### ***Scripting Success at No-Excuses Schools***

*The language that we use in teaching sometimes is "scripting the moves." You've got to script the moves for students. You have to narrate the experience so students understand exactly what the outcomes are.... It's really not that different with teachers. If you want teachers to look thoughtfully at student work, you have to script the moves for them.*

-- Principal, Urban Assembly School for Law and Justice<sup>9</sup>

In 1994, David Levin and Michael Feinberg, two young White Ivy League graduates, had recently completed their stint with Teach for America, a Peace Corps-type program that places recent college graduates in hard-to-staff, under-resourced schools for a two-year commitment. Eager to do more in the fight against educational inequities, Levin and Feinberg decided to try their hand at starting their first two charter schools, one in Houston and one in the South Bronx. At that point, charter schools were still newcomers to the educational landscape, the first charter law having been enacted in Minnesota in 1991. Charter schools, which are independently run public schools that offer families alternative options to their district school, are now established in forty-five states and serve over three million students.<sup>10</sup> Although they continue to generate controversy, charter schools receive bipartisan support and have become a

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<sup>9</sup> Transcripts from Greg Duncan and Richard Murnane's Restoring Opportunity project were made publicly available via their website: <http://restoringopportunity.com>. This quotation is taken from one of the transcripts.

<sup>10</sup> Education Commission of the States, "Charter Schools: Does the State Have a Charter Law?" (January 2020), <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/MBQuestNB2C?rep=CS2001>"; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, "Charter Law Database States" (2020), <https://www.publiccharters.org/our-work/charter-law-database>.

central component of education policy, particularly because they are seen as a way to help low-income families access better schools for their children.<sup>11</sup> As schools of choice, charters generally are open to any student in the district who wishes to apply and are required by state law to enroll students through a random lottery process. Charter schools are concentrated in urban areas, with more than half located in cities (compared to a quarter of traditional public schools).<sup>12</sup>

When Levin and Feinberg founded their first two KIPP schools, they could not have anticipated their eventual success and impact. For its first eight years, KIPP Academy Houston was recognized as a Texas Exemplary School, and KIPP Academy New York was rated the highest performing public middle school in the Bronx for eight consecutive years.<sup>13</sup> By 2020, KIPP was serving more than one hundred thousand students in 255 schools nationwide.<sup>14</sup> Of the students KIPP serves, 95 percent are Black or Latino; 88 percent are low-income students.<sup>15</sup> The U.S. Department of Education has declared KIPP “one of the most promising initiatives in public education today”<sup>16</sup>—a claim echoed by media outlets including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, *Forbes*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and *60 Minutes*.<sup>17</sup>

KIPP would become a model for a group of mostly young, White “education entrepreneurs” starting new charter schools in the 1990s and 2000s and embracing market-based education reforms that emphasize choice, competition, and accountability.<sup>18</sup> Many of these new charters would come to replicate KIPP’s successes. Although charter schools on average have performed no better than traditional public schools on statewide standardized assessments, urban charter schools that follow KIPP’s “no-excuses” model have fared better.<sup>19</sup> Over the past decade, a number of methodologically rigorous studies that compare the outcomes of students who apply to the charter school lottery and are not admitted with the outcomes of those who apply and are admitted have found positive effects of no-excuses schools on students’ standardized test scores, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment rates.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Charter advocates argue that charter schools allow for greater innovation, choice, and competition. Critics argue that charters divert funding and “cream-skin” strong students from traditional public schools, fail to equitably serve all students such as those with special needs, and, with the growth of national charter networks like KIPP, have become less democratic and less responsive to local communities. For a review of key charter school issues, see Gross et al., “Hopes, Fears, and New Solutions.”

<sup>12</sup> Data are from 2017–18. See Hussar et al., “Condition of Education 2020.”

<sup>13</sup> KIPP, “KIPP Charter Schools History,” <https://www.kipp.org>.

<sup>14</sup> KIPP, “KIPP: Results,” <https://www.kipp.org/schools>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. KIPP reports that 88 percent of students qualified for federal free or reduced-price lunch.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of Education, “Successful Charter Schools” (June 2004), <http://www2.ed.gov/admins/comm/choice/charter/report.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> For KIPP’s early media coverage, see Abrams, *Education and the Commercial Mindset*, 210–11.

<sup>18</sup> Kretchmar, Sondel, and Ferrare, “Mapping the Terrain”; Scott, “Politics of Venture Philanthropy.”

<sup>19</sup> For a review of charter school outcomes, see Ferrare, “Charter School Outcomes.”

<sup>20</sup> In a meta-analysis of six experimental studies of no-excuses schools, Cheng et al., “‘No Excuses’ Charter Schools,” found that attending a no-excuses school for one year improved student math scores by 0.25 of a standard deviation (*SD*) and reading scores by 0.16 *SD*. The authors note that it is unclear whether the achievement gains generalize to all no-excuses schools, or just those that are oversubscribed and part of these lottery studies. Other researchers have found, however, that outcomes for non-lottery no-excuses schools are comparable to those of lottery schools, although academic gains tend to be slightly lower (Abdulkadiroğlu et al., “Accountability and

The term “no-excuses”—a label that has fallen out of favor in most of these schools—comes from two books highlighting high-achieving, high-poverty schools that refuse to make excuses for students’ failure, regardless of their race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, neighborhood, or skill level.<sup>21</sup> This statement might seem unremarkable, but many scholars suggest that schools alone cannot overcome the persistent effects of poverty and family background.<sup>22</sup> The image of the failing urban school is a common one, though this stereotype has been critiqued by scholars as misrepresenting the diversity and assets of urban schools.<sup>23</sup> Yet it remains true that despite many repeated school reform efforts, urban schools continue to face significant obstacles, including staggering rates of teacher turnover, inadequate funding, dilapidated buildings, limited curricular options, and school safety concerns.<sup>24</sup> The low-income Black and Latino students concentrated in urban schools, the result of a long history of segregation and racial discrimination in the United States, thus face “opportunity gaps” that translate into “achievement gaps” that have proved difficult to close.<sup>25</sup> This is why no-excuses charter schools have been celebrated by many educators and policy makers for narrowing long-standing test score gaps.

Because of the unusual academic success of no-excuses schools, replicating them has even been proposed as a large-scale education reform strategy to close the racial achievement gap.<sup>26</sup> In the past two decades, the Walton, Broad, and Gates foundations, among others, have poured hundreds of millions into expanding no-excuses charters.<sup>27</sup> In cities like Boston, Newark, and New Orleans, no-excuses schools have come to dominate charter school options.<sup>28</sup> Even public school districts, including those in Houston, Chicago, and Denver, have experimented with no-excuses practices.<sup>29</sup> But before we too eagerly turn to “successful” charters to remake public education, it is important to take a look inside these schools and closely examine their practices. This is one of the first books to do so.<sup>30</sup>

No-excuses schools typically share a common set of practices, such as an extended school day and school year, frequent student testing, highly selective teacher hiring, intensive teacher

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Flexibility in Public Schools”; Tuttle et al., “KIPP Middle Schools”). For high school graduation and college enrollment outcomes, see Coen, Nichols-Barrer, and Gleason, “Long-Term Impacts of KIPP Middle Schools.”

<sup>21</sup> Carter, *No Excuses*; Thernstrom and Thernstrom, *No Excuses*.

<sup>22</sup> The Coleman Report, commissioned under the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as the first national study of schools, found that a student’s family background was a much stronger determinant of student achievement than school quality (Coleman, “Equality of Educational Opportunity”). Research continues to show the power of family background in shaping children’s future outcomes. See, for example, Duncan et al., “School Readiness and Later Achievement”; Lee and Burkam, “Inequality at the Starting Gate.”

<sup>23</sup> Milner, “But What Is Urban Education?”; Ladson-Billings and Tate, “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education.”

<sup>24</sup> Mirón and St. John, *Reinterpreting Urban School Reform*; Payne, *So Much Reform, So Little Change*.

<sup>25</sup> Milner, “Beyond a Test Score.”

<sup>26</sup> Cohodes, “Charter Schools and the Achievement Gap”; Wilson, “Success at Scale in Charter Schooling.”

<sup>27</sup> Hall and Lake, “\$500 Million Question”; Scott, “Politics of Venture Philanthropy.”

<sup>28</sup> Angrist, Pathak, and Walters, “Explaining Charter School Effectiveness,” identified 71 percent of schools in Boston as fully or somewhat “no excuses.” Sondel, “‘No Excuses’ in New Orleans,” reported that many charters in New Orleans self-identified as “no excuses.”

<sup>29</sup> Fryer, “Injecting Charter School Best Practices.”

<sup>30</sup> See also Brooks, *Education Reform in the Twenty-First Century*; Pondiscio, *How the Other Half Learns*; Carr, *Hope Against Hope*.

coaching, a focus on basic math and literacy skills, and a college-going culture.<sup>31</sup> What is most distinctive about these schools, though, is their highly structured disciplinary system. No-excuses schools generally do not permit students to talk quietly in the hallway, enter and exit classrooms on their own, keep backpacks at their desk, wear jewelry, stare into space, slouch, put their head down, get out of their seat without permission, or refuse to track the teacher's eyes.<sup>32</sup> In the words of the urban school principal quoted at the beginning of this section, these schools “script the moves.” They are very intentional in their systems and procedures, dictating to students and teachers how to behave. Although scripting of student behavior and teacher instruction can also be found in traditional public schools, it tends to be concentrated and intensified in no-excuses charters.

Let us take a look at a no-excuses script. To understand the detail and rigidity of these scripts, we can turn to the student conduct section of a student handbook from a KIPP high school.<sup>33</sup> In this section, a comprehensive chart extends for nine pages detailing three tiers of misbehaviors and their consequences. The first tier of misbehaviors includes violations for being off-task, not following directions, disrupting class, sleeping in class, calling out, being out of one's seat, using offensive language, and committing a dress code violation.<sup>34</sup> A closer look at the first few categories clearly illustrates the detailed nature of the schoolwide script for student behavior:

*Off-task:* Not paying attention during instruction; not doing work; not following along; losing focus. This can also include the following: fiddling w/ tool or object, grooming—doing hair, using lotion, passing beauty supplies around classroom, etc. in class; losing place in book while popcorn reading.

*Not following directions:* Not following a class or school procedure; failure to follow a teacher direction or meet an expectation (i.e., missing a direction, not following class routine like passing papers, putting electronics away, lining up, still writing when teacher has given direction to put pencils down, etc.). *This is non-defiant but rather incompetent or opportunistic.*

*Minor disruption:* Talking, tapping, mouth noises, making faces, poor class transitions, excessive volume (i.e., not talking in whisper voices during T&T), any other potentially distracting *behavior exhibited unintentionally or without malicious intent.*

This KIPP high school makes no assumptions that students know what behaviors are expected of them in school; it spells out precisely what they need to do to comply with school expectations. From one perspective, this chart makes transparent what are typically unspoken behavioral expectations of schools, helping students follow them. From another angle, it is unnecessarily precise and prescriptive, reinforcing racialized patterns of social control, a point

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<sup>31</sup> Dobbie and Fryer, “Getting beneath the Veil of Effective Schools”; Wilson, “Success at Scale in Charter Schooling.”

<sup>32</sup> Golann, “Paradox of Success”; Goodman, “Charter Management Organizations.”

<sup>33</sup> “2018–2019 KIPP Atlanta Collegiate High School Student & Parent Handbook,” <https://www.kippmetroatlanta.org>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 50–51.

we will return to shortly.<sup>35</sup>

In recent years, critiques of no-excuses disciplinary practices have intensified.<sup>36</sup> Yet supporters of no-excuses schools have defended these practices as teaching low-income students middle-class behavioral norms. In *Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternal-ism*, education writer David Whitman describes no-excuses schools as an example of a “highly prescriptive institution that teaches students not just how to think but how to act according to what are commonly termed traditional, middle-class values”—such as punctuality, discipline, and effort.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*, education scholars Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom argue that successful new schools for the urban poor not only teach math and reading skills but also change culture and character. In their book, they quote KIPP founder David Levin as saying, “We are fighting a battle involving skills and values. We are not afraid to set social norms.”<sup>38</sup> In an editorial on Promise Academy, a no-excuses school in Harlem, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks likewise states, “Over the past decade, dozens of charter and independent schools, like Promise Academy, have become no excuses schools. The basic theory is that middle-class kids enter adolescence with certain working models in their heads: what I can achieve; how to control impulses; how to work hard. Many kids from poorer, disorganized homes don’t have these internalized models. The schools create a disciplined, orderly and demanding counterculture to inculcate middle-class values.”<sup>39</sup>

Are no-excuses schools teaching middle-class values and skills? Are they transferring valuable cultural capital that their students lack? In this book, I argue that these schools are *not* teaching what sociologists consider to be advantageous middle-class skills and strategies, nor do rigid behavioral scripts afford students the flexibility to learn to deploy cultural capital effectively.

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<sup>35</sup> Prohibitions on personal grooming, facial expressions, and excessive volume codify racial and gender bias, playing into stereotypes of Black girls as loud, obnoxious, and hypersexualized and of Black boys as threatening and hostile. See Morris, “‘Tuck in That Shirt!’”; White, “Charter Schools”; Sondel, Kretchmar, and Dunn, “‘Who Do These People Want Teaching Their Children?’.”

<sup>36</sup> White, “Charter Schools”; Goodman, “Charter Management Organizations”; Ravitch, “How ‘No Excuses’ Schools Deepen Race, Class Divisions.”

<sup>37</sup> Whitman, *Sweating the Small Stuff*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Thernstrom and Thernstrom, *No Excuses*, 67.

<sup>39</sup> Brooks, “Harlem Miracle.”