



Hip-Hop High

Can Mt. Airy's Isaac Ewell turn a \$4 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation into a successful network of success-driven charter schools in low-income urban black communities?

by [Paul Farber](#)

In the former home of the Mt. Airy Church of God in Christ, the pulpit has come alive. The converted house of worship now holds the New Media Technology Charter School, a two-year-old project-based-learning high school with a focus on digital design.

With syncopated crunk-styled instrumentals booming from speakers set on either side of a raised wooden and red velvet platform, the school's 170 students are throwing a pep rally for the basketball team.

"If y'all ain't dancing, they gonna cut it off," urges Tyler Ward, a student serving as the de facto MC, dressed in an unbuttoned white dress shirt with a long white T-shirt underneath. "No standing around."

Students and several instructors huddle close together to watch an impromptu dance contest, while one teen records the happenings on a handheld digital camcorder. This massive space is normally used as the main work area for all four of the 10th-grade advisories-new media-speak for core class groups. Today half of the room's long narrow tables and computer equipment have been pushed to the side to make way for a dance floor.

"Who wants to go against my young'un right here?" asks Ward, holding his hand out toward a student stepping to the stage. "Best Wu-Tanger in the school right here."

The Goal: 15 Project-Based Charter Schools by 2008

From a gray concrete office upstairs overlooking the corner of East Upsal Street and Ogontz Avenue, the pep rally music still reverberates.

Isaac Ewell, a member of the Black Alliance for Educational Options' (BAEO) national staff, holds a large paper coffee cup and speaks to lead instructional specialist for technology and school co-founder Nmuta Jones. A sign on the wall reads: "PROCRASTINATION IS THE THIEF OF DREAMS."



The two men are talking about *The World Is Flat*, the best-selling book by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman.

"It's crazy," says Ewell, a 35-year-old Trenton, N.J., native and director for BAEO's Small Schools Project. "He's saying because of globalization, the world is being flattened. It's why when you call about your credit card, there's a call center in Bangalore in India where jokers are answering."

Jones, who in addition to teaching also has his own computer programming firm, leans over a computer and nods in agreement.

Ewell has functioned as the project's director since last March. His task is to take a \$4 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and oversee the opening of 15 theme-driven, project-based charter schools by 2008 in low-income, urban black communities.

West Oak Lane's New Media Technology Charter School, opened in conjunction with Lotus Academy, a successful Afrocentric Germantown elementary school, is the second of three currently operational BAEO small schools under his supervision. (The others are the Bayard Rustin Living Learning Center in Oklahoma City and the faith-based Clara Mohammed School in Milwaukee.)

"When we start thinking about how we go about doing these schools, we really want to flatten what we do," says Ewell. "The kids in this building are going to be competing with folks in China, Japan and India for jobs. We need to think about how we go about doing everything."

The Critics: You're Screwing the Public School System

Late last year the National Center for Education Statistics-known as the nation's report card-announced what many in the education business already knew: Despite the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act five years ago, students at city schools are still performing below the national average on standardized tests, and the achievement gap between black and Latino youth and their white counterparts is widening.

Pundits point to a variety of possible causes, often citing misplaced personal responsibility, failing institutional support, or some combination of both. But one thing is certain: The history and current predicament of our nation's school system has

been shaped by the reality of race. How to address the inequities of the system has puzzled educators for decades.

In February and December 1999 a group of 167 concerned black educators and professionals gathered first at Marquette University in Milwaukee for an educational symposium, and later in a breakout session at Washington, D.C.'s Mayflower hotel to address that question. The events, which were facilitated by then-Milwaukee school superintendent Howard Fuller, eventually led to the formation of BAEO.

"The only thing we had in common was that we were all black and had a very serious posture about what we needed to do about the crisis in education," recalls Lawrence Patrick, 30, current BAEO president and an attendee at both gatherings. "We were all having a really direct conversation about what we can do that's radical, not this sort of gradual cross-your-fingers-and-hope-it-gets-better-type talk."

In August 2000, after appointing 29 members of the group to its national board, BAEO set up local chapters in 10 cities, including Milwaukee, Detroit, Denver and Philadelphia. Board members here included state House Rep. Dwight Evans, state Sen. Anthony Williams and president of the Philadelphia Workforce Development Corporation Ernest Jones. (In March the Philadelphia chapter, led by area CEO Keisha Jordan, will host BAEO's sixth annual national symposium on educational options for African-Americans.)

The group's stated mission is "to increase quality educational options and to empower families to meet their children's needs." But even with a multipronged, progressive approach that includes educating parents, hosting leadership institutes and providing scholarships for students, it's their support of school choice that draws the most vehement criticism. Because the issue is embraced most enthusiastically by political conservatives, any form of educational reform that has children leaving public schools can conjure up collusion with the political right.

"There's a whole argument that you're screwing the current system if you take students out," says Dr. Nathan Smith, a lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. "But if the current system is screwing the kids, it's hard to argue you shouldn't provide an alternative. It's kind of a straw-man attack."

BAEO president Patrick is quick to refute any claims that the group is selling out to conservative causes. "We want it to be clear to black people we're not gonna be sneaking around. We have to be in control and in the lead of figuring out the solution to our community. We can't wait around for white people, whether liberal or conservative, to come up with solutions for us."

In 2003 BAEO's efforts to do just that were jumpstarted by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant. Part of a \$31 million alternative school initiative from the world's largest private charitable organization, the grant calls for BAEO to fund the opening of small project-based institutions where students learn subjects like English and math in a more traditional manner but carry out most of their coursework in self- and group-directed work. Because the schools receive their charters from public districts around the country, they must meet the local, state and national testing and graduation standards.

"We were really excited about BAEO's mission and focus on serving kids in need," says Jim Shelton, program director for education at the Gates Foundation. "Their efforts to create high-quality schools set an example for the country."

Power to Choose: But How Good the Choices?

The historical roots of project-based learning can be traced from Plato to early-20th-century American philosopher John Dewey's work on democratizing education. More recently groups like the Minnesota-based EdVisions and Providence, R.I.'s Big Picture Company have created successful models for schools that embrace hands-on, student-directed pedagogy. (BAEO has partnered with both organizations for the Small Schools Project.)

In the case of its Gates-funded schools, BAEO accepts applications from those who want charters. Then, after an intensive screening process-which includes submitting both a proposal and feasibility studies-approved organizers get approximately \$150,000 to set up the school. They also receive per-pupil funding directly from the local municipality or the state, along with any support they can garner from private companies and financiers. The main BAEO caveat is that potential school operators must remain involved in the institution once it opens.

Even with quality controls in place, entrenched learning models that emphasize learning from texts and teaching to the test puts pressure on such newfound alternative charter schools to prove their effectiveness.

"There's a fundamental question that's existed in education for a very long time," says Penn's Nathan Smith, who's served as a consultant to both local districts and charter schools. "Are you supposed to learn itemized pieces and then put them together before going out into the real world to apply them? Or should you show up at the table with certain knowledge, dive into a project and learn because of what you applied while you were doing it?"

To ensure the criteria for excellence is continually met in each of its sites, BAEO provides shared resources and talent, and sponsors year-round professional development for its instructors. Their hope is to function as a decentralized school system.

"They have to get their basic funding just like any other school," says BAEO's Patrick. "We're basically going in and blazing them out with a little bit extra on top. We want black parents to have the power to choose, but we don't want to look up in 20 years and realize all the schools they had to choose from were terrible."

The Bet: Mastering the Language and Imagery of Hip-Hop Will Foster Success

"We're like a daycare center in here," says Ewell as he picks a foam building block off the floor next to a pair of Jumparoo baby seats in his Victorian-style East Mt. Airy home. "We have two of everything."

It's past 10 o'clock on a Friday night, and Isaac and his wife Anika are trying to put their 15-month-old identical twins Che and Marley down after a family car trip.

Along with an assortment of baby accessories and tall folded stacks of the twins' clothes on their dining room table, the home is decorated with a collection of diasporic paintings and sculptures from Brazil and Tanzania.

"We've feng-shui-zied this place," says Ewell. In the living room Ewell's teenage son Shamar, a 10th-grader at New Media, is slouched over on the couch, asleep with the TV on.

If Ewell's eldest son is to inherit his father's work ethic, he has many late-night meetings and early-morning business calls ahead of him. Despite growing up poor in the inner city, the former senior-class president of Trenton Central High School thinks he made the best of a bad situation. "I had a weak foundation," says Ewell. "The schools I went to were sub-par-they were definitely inferior schools. I've survived off of hustle and flow."

With the support of his mother and several teachers (including one teacher named Jerri Morrison, who ironically is now submitting a proposal to open a BAEO/Gates small school), Ewell earned a bachelor's degree in history from Morehouse and a master's degree at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. He's also worked in various corporate and grassroots organizations as a lobbyist, consultant and educator. Though his goals center on uplifting the black underclass, he admits his objectives are explicitly tied to his desire to achieve material success-namely to one day be rich.

"Jokers told me that growing up money isn't everything," he says. "But the ones that say that, they got dough. I had a dream that I when I graduated from college, I was gonna work in the stock market and get a candy-apple-red BMW convertible. I was real clear I was gonna get all this. Now my goal is to become wealthy and help create more wealthy black folk."

Ewell-who never got his Beemer, but does drive a shiny red Volvo SUV-exemplifies the ambitions of a burgeoning group of young African-Americans across a variety of professional fields: to use the language and imagery of the music they grew up with to imagine the possibilities of upward social mobility.

"The same critique, perception, worldview, attitude and disposition that hip-hop artists bring to the music, hip-hop generationers bring to their professions," says Bakari Kitwana, author of *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. "I see hip-hop generationers who are parents, educators, artists and activists excited about the possibilities for hip-hop being used as a tool to reach students in elementary and high schools. Elite educators are concerned about the testing of such curriculum to measure its effectiveness, but hip-hop artists/educators are convinced if it helps students to connect to the material and get excited about learning, that's half the battle."



Students can mix their own music in a well-equipped studio.

Ewell, who in addition to growing up a hip-hop fan operated an independent record label in the late '90s, has a vision for bringing hip-hop music and culture into the small schools project. "I'm trying to empower my people," he says. "For me it's a question of how we intellectualize and institutionalize the culture."

For guidance, Ewell has turned to the High School for the Recording Arts in St. Paul, Minn. Launched in 1996 as a pilot program for last-chance high school students interested in the music industry, the school has grown into an acclaimed and accredited learning enclave with state-of-the-art recording facilities, a local radio show and an internationally distributed record label. Ewell first heard about the school at a BAEO-sponsored meeting in Philadelphia from its creator David T.C. Ellis and his partner and program director Tony Simmons.

The High School for the Recording Arts is located in a 20,000-square-foot converted factory in St. Paul and now boasts more than 200 students, many with histories of learning and behavioral difficulties. The school has been nicknamed Hip-Hop High for its innovative approach to utilizing the culture in its context-driven curriculum. (Students do pursue a variety of musical outlets other than rap, including gospel, R&B and punk rock.)

Ewell sees the St. Paul school as a shining example of how he'd like his schools to be run. "Some folks say that young black kids can't learn," he says. "Here's a group of young people who go to the school where the majority of them have not been able to learn, and now they've connected with this school. Their reading scores are going up, their math scores are going up, because the administrators and advisers in the school totally get it."

At the High School for the Recording Arts students shape their own schedules and coursework with the help of advisers and work mostly from a sleekly designed common area of computer workstations with smaller breakout rooms in adjacent hallways. Students who perform well academically get after-school access to the studios, while students who get certified as engineers during the school day are offered paid employment.

"Kids are so used to education being a negative experience," says Simmons, who practiced law before becoming an educator. "If you truly believe that every person is blessed with some bent of genius, you're making them believe in themselves within an environment they've never had."

The Recording Arts school uses a competency-based program for assessing its students, who earn credits only after completing their projects. But credit isn't granted automatically, as students must demonstrate a critical understanding of their work and be able to defend their findings.

"You wouldn't believe how hard and how engaged the student can become once they start experiencing success," says Hans Erickson, a 31-year-old adviser and music facilitator. "You give them the success first, and they're like, 'Oh wait, I can do this.'"

In addition to engaging its pupils' interest, the school has demonstrated relative success in improving standardized test scores, with its students equaling or outperforming comparable schools in their sponsoring district. But beyond these successes, the school promotes the idea that its music-based, student-directed curriculum offers much more than just a vocational education.



"I think you've prepared to live life," says Ellis, a former rapper under Prince's Paisley Park outfit, of those who pass through the school. "You've prepared to be a lifelong learner. You've acquired some citizenship skills. You have job-seeking skills, career skills. You've demonstrated you're efficient."

Hit the wall: The High School for the Recording Arts was created for struggling students. It has since earned a reputation for success.

With the help of an advisory committee—which includes Current TV creative executive and Lyricist Lounge creator Anthony Marshall and hip-hop scholar Fanon Wilkins, among others—Ewell is set to help open similar recording arts schools in Brooklyn and San Francisco in 2007, and is looking to expand the model elsewhere.

Hip-Hop Schools: Next Stop, Philadelphia?

In Philadelphia Ewell has been in serious discussions with Mama's Boys, a local hip-hop and R&B production and management company owned by Jerome Hipps and Michael McArthur, who've been responsible for melding sounds for the likes of Musiq Soulchild and Jill Scott.

The two sponsored a weekly empowerment workshop series last summer titled D.A.S.H. (Destined to Achieve Successful Heights), and are now looking to start their own full-

time charter school in the same mold as the St. Paul recording arts school. Negotiations are still underway-no proposal has been submitted yet-but as Hipps sees it, their concept of empowerment education is a perfect fit.

"I hated textbook learning," says Hipps, the Lehigh-educated CEO. "But if you give me a project, I'm engaged. And some people can't relate to that. You succumb to the way people give you statistics about learning. But when you go out to the real workforce, that's not how it happens."

Ewell agrees. "American society, especially in urban areas, is so dynamic, and in such great need, I don't think one system alone can fix it. You know the whole 'It takes a village to raise a child'-we're all about improving the quality of life."

Beats for Bucks: Encouragement to Be Entrepreneurial

It's a frigid Minnesota morning in December, and Isaac Ewell has sponsored a trip for Jerome Hipps and D.A.S.H. director Brandon Pankey to visit the High School for the Recording Arts.

"When we talk about education, sometimes it's too theoretical," says Ewell, who's visited the school six times in the last 10 months. "You need to show folks where it's happening. That's the thing about this school. It's a proven model. I want them to see my word is my bond."

And in the school's Studio A, it's clear the student musicians are handling their business. Sitting behind a 32-by-8 mixing console and white flat-screen Macintosh computer, 16-year-old musician Devon Johnson is mastering a slew of bass-booming beats he plans to sell.

Here, because extracurricular pursuits are viewed as connected to academic ones, students are encouraged to be entrepreneurial. "I'll never leave this school," says Johnson, as he plays one of his instrumentals from his iPod.

In the conference room for the school's label Another Level Records, Simmons plays samples on his laptop from student compilations on topics ranging from HIV/AIDS prevention to boosting self-esteem.

"This school is a movie," says Hipps.

In a section called Community Space in the back of the school, there's a stage and lunch tables. Here, every Wednesday,

students perform music, make announcements and even answer trivia questions for cash. At the moment the school's gospel choir, backed by a drummer, is singing onstage:

"I've overcome some things/ In search of all my dreams/ Now there's no stopping me ... from my destiny."

When the ensemble finishes, Ellis, who runs this event, invites Ewell to come up to address the room.

"I want to thank you for hosting me again," he says to the 100 or so students in the room. "Every time I come I try to bring other folks. And when I'm not here, I'm always talking about you."

After describing what BAEO is and his role as the Small Schools Project director, he shares the plans for replicating their school back in Philadelphia.

"If we have our way, we'd love to see a high school for the recording arts in New York, in San Fran, Detroit, Chicago, Atlanta, Philadelphia and Japan," he says. "We want to see this go global. These cats have picked up on this. They see the value in connecting youth with the music and media that's so important to all of you."

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