

Some children left behind

No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning

By Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom
Simon & Schuster, New York, 334 pages

REVIEWED BY CHARLES L. GLENN

This is a useful and timely, though ultimately somewhat disappointing, book by a prominent husband-and-wife team: a member of the Massachusetts Board of Education (and senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute) and a distinguished historian who has specialized in ethnic and urban issues in American life.

The book is useful because it brings together in readable form the most important results of a number of recent studies on the stubbornly persistent lag in educational outcomes for black (and, to a lesser degree, Hispanic) youth. Many readers will be encouraged to turn to such sources as Laurence Steinberg's *Beyond the Classroom* and the essays collected by Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips in *The Black-White Test Score Gap* for further analysis of this crucial academic disjunction.

And it is timely because it comes just as the federal No Child Left Behind law has ensured that educators and state policy-makers will no longer be able to conceal the hard facts of this achievement gap. School districts and states are now required to show evidence of adequate yearly progress for each of the racial/ethnic groups in each school, so that the sharp disparities in test scores between white and Asian students, on the one hand, and black and Hispanic students, on the other, will no longer be simply a matter of national statistics to be deplored but a reality that administra-

tors and teachers in thousands of schools will be forced to confront, with serious consequences for failure.

It is timely also because the recent decisions of the Supreme Court in the University of Michigan affirmative action cases are sure to heighten the debate over what can be done to eliminate what many universities and employers see as the need for racial preferences to ensure a diverse enrollment or workforce.

The disappointment with *No Excuses* comes in its prescriptions, or lack thereof. Having identified the problems, both in school practices and in the culture prevalent among black and Hispanic youth, and having demonstrated the futility of simply spending more money on a failing educational system, as well as the powerful barriers to reform of that system, they offer little reason to think "the racial gap in learning" will be closed. Nor do they identify clearly the elements that should go into a strategy to educate vulnerable youth more effectively. After a powerful buildup, the Thernstroms deliver a letdown.

The book starts off reminding us that, in a culture of low educational standards, the amount of schooling completed does not necessarily translate into skills and knowledge acquired. "The employer hiring the typical black high school graduate

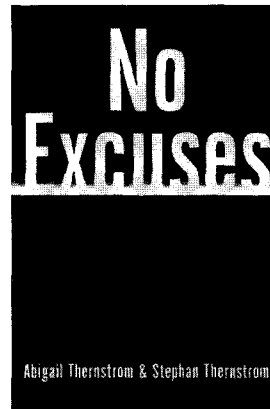
(or the college that admits the average black student) is, in effect, choosing a youngster who has made it only through the eighth grade," the Thernstroms write. "He or she will have a high school diploma, but not the skills that should come with it.... Hispanics do only a little better than African Americans."

Referring to the most recent data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, they add, "In science and math, a mere 3 percent of black students were able to display more than a 'partial mastery' of the 'knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work' at the twelfth-grade level,

in contrast to seven to ten times as many whites and Asians."

These damning statistics might not move the many educators who dismiss tests as a means of assessing how successfully schools have done their work, so the Thernstroms carefully demonstrate that the learning deficiencies shown by the tests have consequences in real life.

For example, they cite a large national sample of 1988 eighth-graders followed for 12 years, by which time "an identical 76.5 percent of whites and of blacks had gone on to some form of postsecondary education." But at that point, their paths diverged. While three out of four



African-Americans entered college, only one in six finished. "The problem is not getting in but staying and graduating," the Thernstroms accurately conclude. Tests are, of course, not a perfect measure of what students learn, but the gap in test scores translates into a gap in life outcomes.

After this dose of gloom, the authors take an upbeat detour into a handful of schools that are teaching black and Hispanic youth to high levels, maintaining high expectations and an engaging school culture. But their exceptional nature is itself a cause for concern.


"Most of the best schools are the inspiration of young idealists who want to work with the disadvantaged. They are missionaries with a sense of calling," the authors note. "But if good schools depend on such exceptional people, there won't be many of them. And thus the question


becomes: If we can't spread magic into every classroom, can we take steps that will make a real difference? For if not, good schools are a hopeless project."

In their conclusion, the Thernstroms return to the example of these inspired schools, highlighting their institutional autonomy. They suggest that the achievement gap can be closed by making every urban public school a charter school and providing vouchers for attendance at faith-based nonpublic schools as well. I happen to agree that the Thernstroms have identified an essential reform, but look in vain for the concrete policy frameworks and incentives that would enable the American educational system to evolve in the direction of more choice and autonomy. As my Belgian colleague Jan de Groof and I have shown in *Finding the Right Balance*,

our study of how 26 countries fund and regulate educational freedom—including, in most cases, faith-based schools—the devil is in the details, and the Thernstroms are notably short on them.

After this excursion into exemplary schools, the Thernstroms turn to culture as an uncomfortable, but unavoidable, factor in academic achievement. They summarize the now-familiar evidence that Asian-American students are doing remarkably well in school (and in subsequent life), that Hispanic students show some encouraging signs of following the trajectory of previous immigrant groups (although many are held back by living in communities where continuing in-migration limits their development of English proficiency), and that African-

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American students exhibit a performance deficit that cannot be explained by the usually cited factors of social deprivation. Most distressingly, the authors point out that “the disparity in academic performance between black and white children of highly educated parents is actually larger than it is for the whole student population. If all black and all white parents were college graduates, the racial gap would be even greater than it is now.”

This is a subject on which it is easy to cause offense. But it is difficult to see how advocates for black and Hispanic youth could be unmoved by the powerful evidence the Thernstroms marshal that African-American and Hispanic children enter school with educational deficits that only become compounded as the years go on. As the authors call for changes in the cultural or attitudinal determinants of black underachievement—saying that black youth need to be convinced to make a more persistent effort to achieve academic success—they merely echo what black social scientists have been saying for more than a decade, and leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Jesse Jackson for much longer.

While I believe they dismiss too quickly John Ogbu’s work on this issue (including his recent book, *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb*), which shows how often the attitudes of even those black youth from successful families undercut their school success, they cannot be accused by any fair-minded person of “blaming the victim.” More to the point, they insist that schools must take on the responsibility of counteracting the cultural drag their minority students come in with, rather than latching onto it as a rationalization for their own mediocrity.

The Thernstroms then proceed to dispose of an assortment of educational remedies they see as failed. First to be dismissed is the claim that

what’s needed is more government spending to make up the gap in resources between schools attended by black pupils and those attended by white pupils. The authors do not oppose more money for education, but they see little evidence that funding discrepancies tell the achievement tale.

In a refutation of Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities*, they make the case that his “contrast between the poor, largely minority schools of Camden and the affluent, largely white schools of Princeton” (both communities in New Jersey) was no longer accurate: “By the 2000-2001 academic year...the student-teacher ratio at Princeton High School was a very low 11.8; at Camden High it had become an even lower 11.5!” In hard dollars, as well, the college town had no edge on the impoverished city, they insist: “Princeton was spending a very comfortable \$12,583 per pupil;

to reduce racial isolation. This is where, in the name of full disclosure, I must reveal that, a dozen years ago, Abigail Thernstrom published a book that sharply criticized my efforts, as the state official responsible for educational equity, to promote racial integration through parental choice of schools, and we had a public dispute over it. But the discussion in *No Excuses* strikes me as carefully balanced, and I would agree with their conclusion that, although “racial clustering—in housing, in the workplace, and in schools—is not good for the fabric of American society,” racial integration by itself is unlikely to have a direct effect on academic achievement. I would, however, place greater emphasis than they do on the value, for students acquiring English, of regular exposure to classmates from homes where English is used in an accurate and elaborated form, and

The authors see little evidence that funding discrepancies matter.

Camden was spending \$400 more, with no payoff in terms of student test scores.”

For us in Massachusetts, the example that hits close to home is Cambridge, which the Thernstroms note spends a “staggering” \$17,000 a year per pupil. Still, only 49 percent of black 10th-graders passed the MCAS English test on their first try in 2002, contrasted with 63 percent for black students statewide; in mathematics, 35 percent of black Cambridge students passed the MCAS the first time around, compared with 55 percent statewide. If spending more money, eliminating tracking, and otherwise adopting every new educational fad could lead to positive results for black pupils, Cambridge should be way ahead of, rather than behind, the rest of the state.

Then the authors turn to efforts

in general on social class integration as an educational plus that, in a good school, helps to maintain high expectations for all.

The Thernstroms also debunk the claim that non-Asian minority students need teachers of the same race to succeed in school. They cite a 2001 Harris poll finding that, in response to the question “How good do your teachers expect your work to be?,” the proportion of black students replying “excellent” was significantly higher than that of white students, suggesting that concerns about low expectations on the part of white teachers have been exaggerated.

Similarly, as Maureen Stone and others have pointed out for years, they note that the idea that the achievement of black students suffers because of low self-esteem has no basis in fact: A National Center for

Education Statistics study of eighth-graders in 1988 found that “just 19 percent of black students but 40 percent of whites had low self-esteem, and that 49 percent of blacks were in the top group in self-esteem, compared with just a third of whites.”

As many studies have pointed out, what is crucial for minority achievement is that students have teachers who are themselves well educated, and who know how to teach with confidence and flexibility. It would obviously be wonderful if more of such excellent teachers were also black or Hispanic, but at present there is a conflict between that goal and the very important effort to raise standards for entry to the teaching profession, and the authors draw attention to that fact.

The tests that screen applicants to teacher preparation programs and, once they complete these (not very demanding) programs, to determine which candidates can be state-licensed currently eliminate a high proportion of blacks who wish to become teachers. If the passing scores for these tests were raised to make teaching a more selective career, as it is in other Western nations, and thereby to improve the quality of instruction, it would further reduce the proportion of black teachers (though such a move might over time have the opposite effect, as it ensured that black students completed school better prepared to clear such hurdles).

But most prominent among the failed remedies explored by the Thernstroms are Head Start and Title I. Since 1965, the federal government has spent nearly \$200 billion on these targeted efforts to provide compensatory and pre-school education, programs that are defended fiercely even though, in both cases, the indications of success have been very limited. A mountain of evaluations and meta-evaluations has brought forth evidence of no more than a mouse of

improvement, leaving program defenders to insist, in the case of Head Start, that the only “developmentally appropriate” goal was “social and emotional growth.” This claim is a convenient way, of course, to excuse the failure to prepare kids to learn to read!

When it comes to the current “standards movement,” the authors observe—correctly, in my view—that neither schools nor students are likely to do what is necessary to make education a success without real and significant consequences. Being from Massachusetts, the authors point out that “when the tenth-grade MCAS started to count [as a requirement of graduation], scores began to climb dramatically.” A study of four urban high schools here found that three-

could be better are resistant to significant change.” While this characterization exaggerates the situation—I would estimate that it might apply to one school in five across the country—it expresses well enough the frustrations of trying to achieve reform in those schools that are most obviously failing.

Unfortunately, the book does not tell us how to go about changing the conditions of teaching on a wide enough scale to make a real difference in American education. Readers who are convinced by the Thernstroms’ account of the failure of our present educational system, but frustrated by the vagueness of their proposed remedies, will want to consider the detailed prescriptions for structural reform in *Reinventing*

They debunk the idea that students need teachers of the same race.

quarters of the students who failed “thought that missing school ‘a lot’ was a ‘big reason,’ and 64 percent admitted that they had not put ‘enough effort into school and homework.’” The Thernstroms add that “flunking had a salutary effect on their behavior; 67 percent said that they were now working harder at their studies.”

But no matter what the remedy, making schools change is no easy feat, and the Thernstroms devote a full chapter to considering the “roadblocks to change” that stand in the way of closing the learning gap.

“Teaching in a regular public school,” the authors argue, “is a profession for saints, masochists, or low-aspiring civil servants. To do the job splendidly asks too much in the way of sacrifice; simply to meet minimum standards asks too little in terms of skills, knowledge, imagination, and dedication. Moreover, those who do it splendidly tend to be educational isolates, while those who

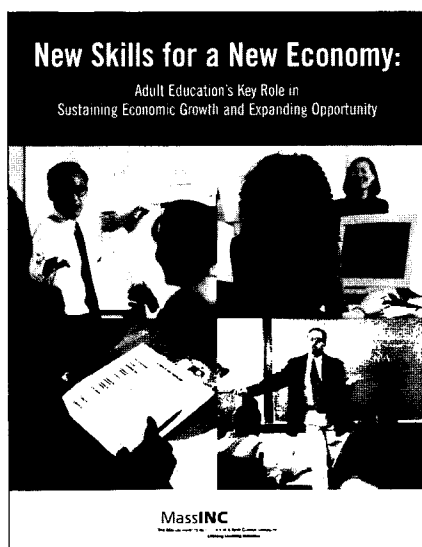
Public Education, by Paul Thomas Hill, Lawrence Pierce, and James Guthrie. They should also read and take to heart the most important book to date on what should be done to make autonomous and accountable schools really effective, E.D. Hirsch Jr.’s *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don’t Have Them*.

No Excuses deserves to be widely read for its evidence of a persistent racial achievement gap, and for its well-documented discussion of why the educational system is so stubbornly resistant to reform. If it increases the pressure for fundamental changes, the book will be well worth the Thernstroms’ efforts. But those who want to work for such changes will have to look elsewhere for blueprints. ■

Charles L. Glenn is professor of educational policy at Boston University. From 1970 to 1991 he was responsible for urban education and civil rights at the Massachusetts Department of Education.

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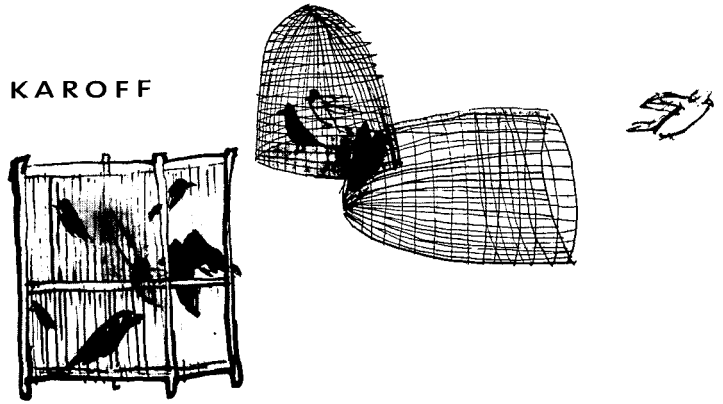
TWO POEMS BY H. PETER KAROFF

PLAY ON WORDS

In a good play on words
Ideas seem to just emerge,
Fully formed long lyrical lines
From the chamber of a brilliant mind.

Hah! Don't believe it my friends!
Chaos—thousands, thousands of words,
Ideas, theories, notions carom off walls,
Tumble off the backs of one another.
Some drift lazily like hot-air balloons,
Bump gently up against the ceiling
Or as bats do hang upside down.
Others dash madly about like sperm
In passionate search of an egg to fertilize,
While those deemed worthless fall away
And die a slow lingering death.
How sad is the dismembered idea!

Once in a great while an event occurs.
Call it metamorphosis, transformation,
Inspiration out of the incomprehensible—
An idea is born and pops into plain view.
Such joy in the chamber of the mind that night
As all of those still stuck in chaos party
In everlasting hope their turn will come.
The birth of a good idea is rare indeed.
Even rarer are those who have the gift.
To those who do, we say Salut!



WILL

It's a matter of will
This game of life
Is inner rather than outer

Conception is nice
But doesn't express will
While execution—oh yes

No prescription here
Yet focus drives
Closure

Organizations are built
Survive and prosper
Based on will one or multiple

Governments fail from lack
Fortunes rise and fall
And great art is made by force of

You won't find will in résumés
It isn't always noisy
And often lies deep

Obsession while not will
Is part of the intensity
Which is a precondition

The ah ha components are
Passion and huge ambition
All over a good idea

Will unromanticized
Along with love
It is our most powerful

*H. Peter Karoff is founder and chairman
of The Philanthropic Initiative.*