
No Excuses: Closing America's Racial Gap in Learning

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Abigail Thernstrom and her husband, Stephan Thernstrom, are authors of the book No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning, published by Simon & Schuster in October 2003. Ms. Thernstrom spoke at a Center of the American Experiment luncheon in January 2004.

I am proud to be on the Board of Advisers of the wonderful Center of the American Experiment. And I have to add, the level of intellectual and political discourse that I have found in Minneapolis far surpasses that which I encounter in the greater Harvard University fallout area that I normally inhabit. I am truly delighted to be here.

The racial gap in academic achievement between whites and Asians, on the one hand, blacks and Hispanics, on the other hand, is an educational crisis. But it is also the nation's most important civil rights issue. It is an American tragedy and a national emergency—for which *there are no good excuses*. Hence the title of our book: *No Excuses*.

Unequal skills and knowledge—not unequal education by the measure of years spent warming a seat in school, but unequal skills and knowledge—are

today the main source of ongoing racial inequality. And racial inequality is America's great unfinished business, the wound that remains unhealed.

Students who have equal skills and knowledge—whatever their color—will have roughly equal earnings. That was not true yesterday. It is today. Schooling has become the key to racial equality.

In writing *No Excuses*, Steve and I wanted, above all, to create an overdue sense of outrage. We do have a vision of what needs to be done. Tinkering around the edges of educational reform will not solve the problem. Tweaking curricular materials, adding more professional development, busing kids around to get racially balanced classes or the “right” mix of high and low income kids, adding a few more dollars to the school budget, subtracting a few

kids from the average class size—none of these will close the racial gap.

Although funding of American public schools has doubled since 1970 with no evident student gains, extra money can be used well. But the average inner-city school is not under-funded by the measure of state per pupil spending, and throwing more dollars at an unchanged system is likely to get unchanged results. Teachers also need to be more academically skilled, but the usual teaching credentials are close to worthless. Reducing class size is an extremely expensive strategy and requires finding more excellent teachers—already a daunting task. So far, the smaller class size record shows meager returns, at best, and only for the very early grades. I like racially integrated schools, but busing has not increased student performance, and, in any case, it is not the case that schools have become more racially isolated in recent decades.

In *No Excuses* we describe some fabulous schools that are getting great results with kids who are normally tragically disconnected from the world of academic learning. But neither we nor anyone else has a magic solution. Our first aim was not to offer a definitive answer, but rather to paint a picture—not only of the gap, but also of the very limited usefulness of the usual explanations for that gap. And we wanted, as well, to make clear the dismaying failure of programs like Head Start and Title I, which have done nothing significant to level the educational playing field.

First, a brief look at the gap. But, as a preliminary note, I should say, this is not, in our view, an IQ story. It's a story of kids who need to acquire skills and knowledge, but who have been tragically and needlessly left behind.

So, a brief look at some of the numbers:

- On the nation's most reliable tests—the National Assessment for Educational Progress (or NAEP)—the typical black or Hispanic student at age seventeen is scoring less well than at least 80 percent of his or her white classmates. On average, these non-Asian minority students are four years behind those who are white and Asian. They are finishing high school with a junior high education.

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 eighth grade.

- Here's another way of judging the magnitude of the gap. In five of the seven subjects tested by NAEP, a majority of black students perform in the lowest category—below basic. That means that a majority of black students do not have even a “partial” mastery of the “fundamental” knowledge and skills expected of students in the twelfth grade. Hispanics are doing only a tad better.
- The news is no happier when we switch our gaze from students at the

bottom to those who are at the top. Take math. In math, only 0.2 percent of black students fall into NAEP's advanced category; the figure for whites is eleven times higher and for Asians thirty-seven times higher. Again, Hispanic students are only slightly ahead of blacks.

With so few blacks and Hispanics with superb academic skills by the end of high school, the pool of those ready to do the work demanded in highly selective colleges and likely to become part of the American professional and business elite is inevitably very small.

Black students were of course even farther behind three decades ago, when NAEP data first became available. But the modest progress that occurred through much of the 1980s has largely come to an end, and there are some indications that the racial gap is widening.

Thus, current trends offer no grounds for complacency.

At a conference a couple of years ago, a distinguished educator said to me, why talk about race when social class is the real issue. We wish that were true. Of course, parental education, income, place of residence all make a difference in school achievement. But they account for only about a third of the gap. In part, we argue, group cultural differences explain the remaining two-thirds.

Meeting the demands of school is harder for members of some racial and ethnic groups than for others. Some

group cultures are more academically advantageous than others—a point everyone knows and few want to discuss. Asian parents typically expect their children to work extraordinarily hard in school—and the children do so, cutting classes less often than their peers, enrolling in advanced-placement courses at triple the white rate, spending twice as much time on homework as their non-Asian classmates. As a result, on some math tests, the white-Asian gap is actually larger than the black-white gap. People have asked us why we use the word “culture,” which seems to imply an inheritance impervious to change. We did hesitate, precisely because we worried the term would be misunderstood. But our assumption is quite different: that cultural traits are shaped and reshaped by environment. Hard work, for instance, is a culturally transferable skill, and—more important—schools can play an invaluable part in shaping values, habits, and skills.

We argue that Hispanics are an immigrant group—much like the Italians of around 1910. And it's clear they have been moving up educationally over time, although their future is less certain. In any case, it is African-Americans who are of greatest concern.

The first signs of underachievement appear very early in the life of black children. Although scholars have not been able to pinpoint the precise reasons, they can identify some of the risk factors that seem to be limiting their intellectual growth. Among them: low-birth weight, single-parent households,

and birth to a very young mother. African-American children not only arrive in school less academically prepared; they also tend to be less ready to conform to behavioral demands. They watch an extraordinary amount of television—essential to belonging to the peer culture, they say.

The process of connecting the typical black child to the world of academic achievement isn't easy in the best of educational settings. But good schools show that it can be done. Terrific schools—the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) Academies in D.C. and elsewhere, among others—provide a road map to academic success.

The best inner-city schools have greatly extended instructional time with more hours in the day, longer weeks, and longer years. They have terrific principals who have the authority and autonomy to manage their budgets, set salaries, staff the school with fabulous teachers and get rid of those who don't work out. These principals are constantly in classrooms, giving feedback to teachers—the best sort of professional development. The schools we describe focus relentlessly on the core academic subjects, insisting that their students learn the multiplication tables, basic historical facts, spelling, punctuation, the rules of grammar, and the meaning of often-unfamiliar words. They provide safe, orderly environments in which to teach and learn. But they also aim to transform the culture of their students, as that culture affects academic achievement.

“Are we conservative here?” Gregory Hodge, the head of the Frederick

Douglass Academy in New York's Harlem, once asked me rhetorically. “Of course we are,” he answered. “We teach middle-class values like responsibility.” The KIPP Academy's David Levin has echoed Hodge. “We are fighting a battle involving skills and values. We are not afraid to set social norms,” he has said. The best schools work hard to instill the “desire, discipline, and dedication” (KIPP watchwords) that will enable disadvantaged youth to climb the American ladder of opportunity.

Figuring out what great schools look like is not difficult. But how to get there on a massive scale? That is the question to which no one has a good answer—given the structure of public education, with its built-in obstacles to the sort of fundamental reform that will be needed. In a long chapter, we describe those daunting obstacles, which include the collective bargaining agreements that govern almost all aspects of a school day in many states.

Will the mandatory testing and other aspects of No Child Left Behind help? We believe they will, but they won't be sufficient to basically alter the picture, the disappointing record of state-level reforms in Texas and elsewhere suggest. The longer we worked on *No Excuses*, the more radical our voices became.

The mind-numbing data on the racial gap in academic achievement should make all Americans furious—and it should radicalize the debate over educational reform. Racial progress on many fronts has been enormously heartening. But in a society committed

to equal opportunity, we still have a racially identifiable group of educational have-nots—young African-Americans and Latinos whose opportunities in life will almost inevitably be limited by their inadequate education.

The alternative to a radical overhaul of American education is too many black and Hispanic youngsters continuing to leave high school without the skills and knowledge to do well in life. Doors are closed to too many non-Asian minorities. ***The perpetuation is of ancient inequalities.*** Is that acceptable? No decent American will say it is.

Questions and Answers

Janet Nilsen: My experience with recent African immigrants from eight nations shows them to have positive attitudes. They say, “I’ve come here, I’m an immigrant, I want to make it.” They work very hard. But they don’t seem to have the same approach to education. Why do you think that is?

Thernstrom: That’s a very good question and it’s one we asked ourselves over and over again in writing the book. The problem is that the National Assessment for Educational Progress simply does not ask an important question. They ask about racial and ethnic identity, but they don’t ask about national origin, so the data don’t exist.

But, anecdotally, I know you’re right. These are immigrant students with stars in their eyes. The two KIPPs I know best—in Houston and in New York—are very, very different, precisely because in Houston you have immigrant kids whose families believe in

America as the land of opportunity and deliver that message to the kids. And when you’re in the South Bronx in New York, dealing with the African-American and Puerto Rican kids, you are into a culture that is much more discouraged, much more bitter. The same messages are not delivered about hard work in school.

What about the impact on the gap of family structure? I talked about the fact that socioeconomic status, parental income, parental education, place of residence account for almost only a third of the gap. Well, that’s another question that unfortunately NAEP does not ask. So we have no hard data on that. We would call that part of the cultural package, but we don’t have the numbers we would like.

Grant Abbott: I’m the executive director of the St. Paul Area Council of Churches and I’m wondering if these charter schools and these KIPP academies are predominantly monocultural in the sense that they are predominantly African-American, predominantly Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, so that while instilling these values in which the identity of the child as a person of color is affirmed and their culture is affirmed, rather than the sense that they have to deny who they are and become white in order to succeed.

Thernstrom: Nobody is asking these kids to deny who they are. There’s no message in these schools that that there’s something wrong in a broad sense with your culture or that race isn’t still important in one’s identity in America. Every individual has

lots of qualities besides the color of his or her skin. The message is that we value you, and that however you want to define yourself is fine. If you want to put the fact that you are a black seventh grader on the top of your list of self-definition, if you want to put the color of your skin on the top of your list, that's fine. But there is no conflict between identifying yourself first and foremost as an African-American in America, there's no conflict between that and learning the skills that will enable you to join mainstream American society and be a success.

And, of course, mainstream American society keeps being shaped and reshaped by the contributions of African-Americans to this country. My book includes a discussion of Ralph Ellison—a product of the Jim Crow South—who learned to be the writer he was, not by reading segregated literature, but by reading T. S. Eliot and others in the Western canon of great literature, which now includes Ellison himself, as well as many other black writers.

Phyllis Krutsch: I'm a former member of the Board of Regents at the University of Wisconsin system and I'm wondering if it's your sense that there is either a growing or visible number of academicians or state school leaders who see things the way you do, because that's a necessary first step, or at least part of it.

Thernstrom: I regard the academy as always hopeless. I'm so glad I stopped teaching! It's bad enough that

my husband is a professor. It was the best choice I made in my life, to turn my back on the academy. I don't think in schools of education, for instance, we're going to get a great reception, or, so far, that's been my sense. What interests me is that this book, to a degree that we never dreamt of, is getting a very positive reception across the political spectrum—columnists like Clarence Page and William Raspberry, both, of course, black, as well as people on the conservative end. And I do a lot of black talk radio and the parents who call in say, "You're right, you're right, you're right." I don't think I'd get that reception in a university, but, on the other hand, universities, thank God, aren't America.

Bob MacGregor: This past year, I attended a very well-attended lecture at Macalester College by a black professor, recently retired, and his theme was that the number one problem in the United States is white racism and the reason for the gaps that you're talking about in education is white racism. The mostly white audience gave him a standing ovation. How would you respond to his observation?

Thernstrom: It's really interesting how much whites adore to be called racists. They just eat it up. If you look at the polling data on racial attitudes in America, there's been the most astonishing revolution in white racial attitudes in this country. Pollsters don't even ask anymore such questions as "What would you do if a black family moved next door to you?" Because the

number of families that respond “I’d move out” is now so small it’s not worth asking the question.

We had a closing of the gap between 1971 and when NAEP first began to report on testing in 1988, and the numbers have been going south since ’88. And then there’s another little problem that the picture doesn’t change in school districts where you have a heavy concentration of non-white teachers, D.C., Detroit, Chicago. I wish it were whitey’s fault, because then it would be, in some ways, easy to fix. But it’s not so simple. One of the wonderful things about Martin Luther King was that he had such confidence in the capacity of white America to change. He was such an American patriot in that sense. And, of course, he was right. America has changed and it just doesn’t work as an explanation. But, of course, it gets a standing ovation.

I was debating Ron Walters on *The O’Reilly Factor* on the whole question of black curriculum. He said something about me calling for a white education. And I said, “Tell me what black math is.” I don’t have much patience for that notion, that there’s black math and there’s white math. No, I have no patience for it.

We’ve just got to keep pushing, because our future is involved. I think a lot of people think that these are somebody else’s kids. They’re not somebody else’s kids. They’re our kids. They’re all our kids.

Dan Ritchie: One of the structural problems in public education is that, apart from charter schools, you have a

relatively unresponsive government institution that interposes itself between the parent and child and says, in effect, give us your children, we will take care of their education. Of course, that does not occur in nonpublic education. Parents are intimately involved in their schools and they expect their schools to be responsive. As long as that structural obstacle remains, as it will in public education, how optimistic can we be about the changes you look for?

Thernstrom: I don’t know how optimistic one can be. I’m keeping hope alive in this book, partly because I think one of the great things about No Child Left Behind is that, of course, it insists that all districts break down scores by race, ethnicity, eligibility for the federal lunch program, and so forth. So nobody can deny the reality here of the problem any longer. We’ve been into deep denial for so long.

I have this wild hope that when all children aren’t up to proficient in twelve years (as NCLB demands) and we don’t have a “qualified teacher” in every classroom (because the whole licensure process is so insane, it’s structured to produce mediocrity) that there will be enough political pressure, enough anger, enough outrage that people will say it can’t be business as usual anymore. Whether that will happen, I don’t know, because there has got to be change across the landscape of education, including the whole licensure process for teachers. We are not attracting the best and the brightest of young people into the teaching profession.

Katherine Kersten: Could you expand on the difference in academic achievement and experience between the typical black boy and the typical black girl?

Thornstrom: I wish that we had more data in the book. That is a subject we neglected. But the girls are doing so much better than the boys. And, of course, you see that in college enrollment. The gender imbalance in college enrollment is very, very striking, but for blacks it's appalling. I had an experience last year at the North Star Academy, a wonderful inner-city charter school. Middle school parents said to the director, wait a minute, we've got no place to send our kids when they graduate from the middle school. We need a high school. And so they started a high school—one grade at a time. I walked into one of the high school classrooms and it took my breath away. I looked around and I said to the students, where are the boys? Students couldn't go to the high school unless they'd gone through the middle school. The middle school has about an even gender balance, and this wonderful school couldn't hold on to the young men. That is a serious problem and I've got no answer to it. There is so much undone research. Social scientists have not begun to get their arms around this problem and one obvious topic is on the gender difference.

Henry Horne: It would seem to me that, for an African-American child who is successful academically today, it would seem that he or she is a star, given the data that you've put forth.

That they should be held up in the highest esteem and as the most sought-after individuals by any university or company in the country, given the other social agenda issues that we have for equity and opportunity. How do you match this with the hiring practices of corporations, how do you match this with the decisions by universities regarding their admissions policies, and where are we going to get this balance? And it backs up all the way into the elementary school program. There seems to be a paradox of sorts there, and I'm not quite sure how, for the students who are successful, where their opportunity is going to lie. And I just don't know how to rectify that.

Thornstrom: Every selective college and university in the country is running after the academically successful African-American students. There's a bidding war, an unbelievable bidding war for them, because the pool is too small.

Barb Sykora: I sit in the Minnesota House of Representatives, in education, particularly. Have you done studies where you looked at mostly students from middle- and upper-income levels of a whole variety of races, and when they all had that equal opportunity, were there still differences in achievement?

Thornstrom: There's been quite a bit of work, as you probably know, on Shaker Heights, Ohio. Ron Ferguson at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government has been focused on that and a consortium of other affluent districts.

We did not do separate work on that, we summarize what is known about Shaker Heights. You are perfectly right that there is still a huge gap. There is an awful lot of work still to be done in terms of social science research on these questions. I suspect I'm going to write the same book five years from now on what we've learned since 2003.

Barbara Washington: I'm with Hamline University's Center for Excellence in Urban Teaching and I have a few thoughts that I'd like to address. We based our program at Hamline on Dr. Belinda Williams's research. She pulls together quite a bit of the information that you've been talking about and addressing, particularly African-Americans and students of color in her new book called *Closing the Achievement Gap*. And she talks about the two groups that came to the United States, one by choice and one by capture. And that gives a lot of understanding as to why one group does better and another group doesn't do so well. What I'd like to know, though, is how those schools that are doing well, that you mentioned earlier, deal with the impact of culture on teaching and learning and how they use that culture, through the cultural responses and learning styles of their students, as a resource versus a barrier.

Thernstrom: I very, very much hope you will read the book and look at the two chapters describing the

schools, in particular. There's no disagreement over black history in this country. I don't think anybody in this room is prepared to defend that history. The question at this point is not how can we undo the past, because we can't, the question is on what basis do we walk forward from today. And that is, it seems to me, what is worth talking about. On what basis do we walk forward given what has been a terrible history?

Don Fraser: The head of research for our Federal Reserve Board here has argued that investment in high-quality early education preschool produces a very large public return, and I'm wondering what your comment would be on that.

Thernstrom: The data on early education do not deliver a clear message that that is the best use of scarce dollars. Personally, I like early education very, very much, but the problem is mostly it's not high quality. Head Start is the best example we've got. So what would we get with really high-quality early education? We would not see what we're now seeing, which is gains washed out in the early years? I don't know the answer to that. But, also, frankly, my husband knows that social science literature better than I do. We do have some discussion of it in the book. ■