
BOOK REVIEWS

No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning BY ABIGAIL THERNSTROM

BY PETER KIRSANOW

No Excuses – Closing the Racial Gap in Learning is the most important civil rights book in a generation. And one of the most encouraging.

Nearly forty years after passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, fifty years since *Brown v. Board of Education*, the most pressing problem on the civil rights front is the yawning racial gap in academic achievement. More than a third of all blacks are solidly middle class. Blacks attend college at the same rates as whites. Virtually all of the “civil rights” legislation that can be passed has been passed. The avenue toward the American Dream is wide open to members of every racial and ethnic group in the country as never before in our history. Yet there remains an astonishing disparity in academic achievement between blacks and Hispanics on the one hand and whites and Asians on the other. And despite reams of legislation, billions of tax dollars and scores of educational reforms, the disparity shows signs of actually widening.

The Thernstroms, the uncannily insightful authors of the encyclopedic *American in Black and White*, perhaps the definitive work on race and race relations in contemporary America, take an unflinching look at the problem, the reasons therefor and proven and potential remedies.

This is not a book for the merely well-intentioned. This is a book about *results*. Supported by copious data and the kind of rigorous analysis normally reserved for the “hard” sciences, *No Excuses* paints a frustrating, if not infuriating, picture of the misguided policies, entrenched interests and head-in-the-sand political correctness that have aggravated the educational crises involving black and Hispanic students.

But for all of the disconcerting information about the underperformance of black and Hispanic students, this is fundamentally a book of hope. And it’s a page turner to boot – a scholarly tome that reads almost like a suspense novel.

Make no mistake. The Thernstroms are not starry-eyed optimists predicting that the next billion-dollar, enlightened reform will be the magic formula that finally propels black and Hispanic students toward academic proficiency. Rather, the book’s optimism is precisely a consequence of a sober, detailed analysis of what, at first blush, appears to be an intractable problem but which, upon close inspection, has actually proven to be remediable by application of certain basic principles. Even more so, the optimism is grounded in a studied, adamant belief in the capabilities of all American

children.

The analysis in the book transcends ideology. Shibboleths of both the right and the left are exposed, although those of the latter seem to have contributed substantially more to the inertia that is emblematic of the problem.

And the problem is prodigious. Black and Hispanic students are horribly underprepared to tackle school work at every grade level, beginning as early as kindergarten. By twelfth grade, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (“NAEP”), the “nation’s report card”, the average black and Hispanic student is performing at the academic level of the average white or Asian eighth grader. An employer hiring the average black high school graduate is, in effect, hiring a person with the reading and math skills of a middle school graduate.

The gap doesn’t end there, but persists through college and graduate school. Black and Hispanic high school graduates entering college with the functional equivalent of an eighth grade education drop out at nearly three times the rate of white or Asian students and tend to cluster in the bottom sixth in academic rankings. For all of the hyperventilation about the need for racial preferences and a “critical mass” of preferred minorities on college campuses, the reality is that there are simply too few academically competitive black and Hispanic students to go around.

Equally distressing is the dearth of black and Hispanic academic superstars, particularly in math and science. Only 0.1% of black students score in the Advanced range on the NAEP science assessments and only 0.2% meet that standard in math. Whites are 34 times more likely to score in the Advanced range in science and 11 times more likely to do so in math. (The Advanced math scores for Asians is 37 times greater than that for blacks.)

The Thernstroms rightly call this a crisis, particularly in an age of technology. They note that the causes for these disparities are numerous, beginning with the residual effects of slavery and Jim Crow. But the real culprits are clearly contemporary and revolve principally around the educational establishment and the attitudes of some of the students themselves.

As *No Excuses* makes clear, the nation’s public school systems are notoriously resistant to any kind of change, let alone the kind of reforms necessary to close the

educational achievement gap. Major urban schools, among the worst performing, are monopolistic, bureaucratic behemoths, virtually impervious to legislative sticks or financial carrots. Teachers' union contracts make getting rid of rotten teachers nearly impossible and the credentialing hoops aspiring educators must jump through drive many of the more promising candidates to more lucrative professions. Even the most dedicated and talented school administrators often surrender to being little more than caretakers of the status quo. The result is hundreds of thousands of black and Hispanic students locked in what amount to holding pens defined by pedagogical sclerosis and an aversion to standards while graduating hordes of students who are functionally illiterate.

Yet the problem begins even before these unfortunate students ever set foot in the classroom. As noted earlier, black and Hispanic students enter kindergarten already at a significant educational deficit compared to their white and Asian classmates, which deficit often expands as the students proceed toward graduation. Some of the reasons are well-known factors such as poverty rates, parental educational attainment levels, single parenthood and so forth. But even after controlling for these factors, large gaps between blacks/Hispanics and Asians/whites remain.

The Thernstroms review voluminous literature demonstrating that, as scholars ranging from Orlando Patterson to John McWhorter have noted, one of the primary reasons for the achievement gap is group culture. The authors carefully explain that in this context "culture" can be a loaded term, one that suggests that one is "blaming the victim." It's abundantly clear that this is *not* what the authors are doing; they cite many of the reasons why some families are trapped in counterproductive behaviors. But culture, as they see it, is simply the values, attitudes and skills transferred to a child through the family. It is not an immutable set of group traits passed from one generation to the next; but rather, "skills, habits and styles" that are susceptible to change.

The cultural traits that contribute to academic success, irrespective of race or ethnicity, are no secret: valuing education, organization, discipline, attention to detail. The extent to which students embrace these traits manifests itself in a variety of ways. Some of the measurable examples include hours spent on homework, hours spent watching TV and the number of "hard" or AP courses taken.

Although the Thernstroms lament the large number of hours all American kids spend watching TV, blacks and Hispanics far outpace their white and Asian classmates. At every grade level blacks and Hispanics watch much more TV than anyone else. Nearly 50% of black fourth graders watch 5 hours or more of TV on a *typical school day*, compared to less than 20% of white fourth graders. By twelfth grade, a third of black students still watch 5 hours or more of TV compared to just 5% of whites.

The spectacular academic success of Asian students is in part attributable to long hours of homework. But it's not just the number of hours but the quality of time spent on homework. The data suggest that many poor students may be more likely to "multi-task" when it comes to watching TV and doing homework, rather than concentrating on homework alone.

But perhaps one of the best predictors of academic success is what Laurence Steinberg calls the "trouble threshold," *i.e.*, the lowest grade students can get before they're in trouble with their parents. For black and Hispanic students, that level is below a C-; for whites it's below a B-; and for Asians, it's below an A-. It's logical to assume that a student who believes he will get in trouble for getting a B+ will work harder than one who can skate until he gets a D+ — a grade that, by today's inflated standards, often means only that the student has a pulse.

The good news is that nonproductive cultural traits can be changed for the better. The Thernstroms cite a number of real life examples of remarkably successful schools that are instilling productive traits in their students. This is the most exciting part of the book.

The authors actually visited a number of schools throughout the country to study what works. Most successful schools were charter schools that have control over their own budgets, the teachers they hire and the length of the school days. There were also a few classroom oases within traditional public schools (the amazing Rafe Esquith's class in central L.A. is but one example).

The examples cited by the Thernstroms such as the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) Academy in the South Bronx and the North Star Academy in Newark have student bodies that are virtually 100% black and/or Hispanic and that are drawn from neighborhoods of crushing poverty with all the maladies typically associated therewith. Nonetheless, these students are performing at levels that rival even those of the best schools in the most affluent neighborhoods — and far beyond students from their own neighborhoods who attend other public schools. For example, 66% of "Kippsters" score *above* their grade level for math compared to only 9% of the students in the district from which KIPP draws its students.

What's the secret? Boatloads of funding? Skimming the best students from the pool? No, say the authors. The "secret" is the *implementation* of a core set of standards and values. The schools set high standards and demand much from their students and parents. In return, the schools deliver quality teaching and relentless dedication to student success.

The authors stress that while this sounds child-

ishly simple, it's difficult to do even without the constraints described earlier. But the schools, from top to bottom, tolerate no excuses for failure.

The Thernstroms emphasize that the schools don't waste time. North Star operates an extra hour per day and 11 months out of the year. By eliminating fluff and disorganization Amistad Academy in New Haven effectively adds 3 hours of teaching time per day. Saturday programming is common.

Discipline and order dominate every aspect of the school and student behavior. Disciples of James Q. Wilson's "broken window" theory, the slightest infractions are immediately remedied.

Testing is also a key ingredient. Basic math, reading and writing skills are stressed without apology. Competition is not a bad word.

The students react to all of this with a sense of accomplishment and pride and a hunger for learning and success.

Obviously, there are many more elements to their success and the Thernstroms document them exhaustively. (Indeed, this review necessarily covers only a fraction of this ambitious work's reach.) They also assess the various obstacles to reproducing these successes at traditionally public schools (among the more intriguing analyses are the impact of school vouchers and No Child Left Behind).

In the end, however, the health of our society demands that we do all we can to duplicate the accomplishments of KIPP and the others. The Thernstroms make an impressive case that if it can be done there, it can be done elsewhere. No excuses.