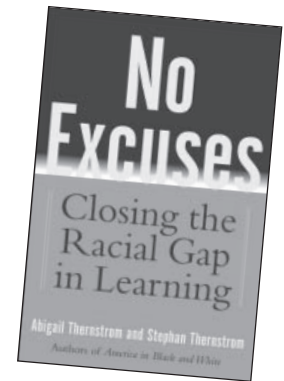


# Policy Dialogue

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## A 'No Excuses' Look at Education Reform

*Pioneer Institute held a forum December 19, 2003, with the authors of No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning. Abigail Thernstrom is a former member of Pioneer's Board of Academic Advisors and Stephan Thernstrom is a professor of government at Harvard University. Arguing that the poor academic performance (on average) of black and Hispanic students is a civil rights crisis, the Thernstroms call for the replication of charter and other innovative schools "with great leaders and great teachers who have high academic and behavioral standards." Two respondents, Brett Peiser, founder and executive director of South Boston Harbor Academy Charter School, and Michael Contompasis, chief operating officer of the Boston Public Schools, gave their perspectives. The remarks of each speaker are excerpted below.*



### The Tragic Racial Gap in Academic Achievement

**Abigail Thernstrom:** The racial gap in academic achievement between whites and Asians on the one hand and blacks and Hispanics on the other hand is an educational crisis and the nation's most important civil rights issue. It is an American tragedy—a national emergency for which there are no good excuses—hence, the title of our book, *No Excuses*. It's a story of kids who need to acquire skills and knowledge, but who have been tragically and needlessly left behind.

Students who have equal skills and knowledge—whatever their color—today will have equal earnings. That wasn't true years ago. Schooling has become a key to racial equality. In writing *No Excuses*, we wanted above all to create a sense of outrage, an overdue sense of outrage. We do have a vision of what needs to be done. And tinkering around the edges of education reform will not solve the problem.

Let's take a brief look at the gap. On the nation's most reliable tests—the National Assessment of Educational Progress, called NAEP or the "nation's report card on education"—a typical black or Hispanic student at age 17 scores less well than at least 80 percent of his or her white classmates. On average, these non-Asian minority kids are four years behind those who are white and Asian. They are finishing high school with a junior high school education. So the employer hiring the typical black high school graduate or the college who admits the average black student is, in effect, choosing a youngster who has made it only through eighth grade.

Here's another measure of the magnitude of the gap. In five of the seven subjects tested by NAEP, a majority of black students perform in the lowest category, which is called "below basic." That means the majority of black students do not even have—in NAEP language—a

Audio excerpts of the speakers' remarks are available on Pioneer Institute's website at [www.pioneerinstitute.org/no\\_excuses.cfm](http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/no_excuses.cfm).

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partial mastery of the fundamental knowledge and skills expected of students in the twelfth grade. Across the nation, Hispanics are doing only a tad better. Here, in Massachusetts, they do worse.

The news is no happier when we move from students at the bottom to those who are at the top. In math, only 0.2 percent of black students fall into NAEP's advanced category. The figure for whites is 11 times higher; for Asians, it is 37 times higher. Again, Hispanics nationwide are only slightly ahead of blacks.

Black students were even further behind three decades ago when NAEP first began to test students. But the modest progress that occurred between 1970 and the late 1980s has largely come to an end. There are some indications that the racial gap is widening. Current trends offer no grounds for complacency.



***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. Is that acceptable? No decent American will say yes.***

**—Abigail Thernstrom,  
No Excuses co-author**

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 but few are willing to discuss. Asian parents typically expect their children to work extraordinarily hard at school. The children do so, cutting classes less often than their peers, enrolling in advanced placement classes at triple the white rate and 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. But hard work is a culturally transferable skill. School can play an invaluable part in shaping the values, habits, and skills that make for academic achievement.

It is African-Americans who are of greatest concern. First signs of underachievement appear very early in the life of black children. Scholars have not been able to pinpoint the precise reasons. But they can identify some of the risk factors that seem to be limiting intellectual growth. Among them are low birth weight, single parent households, and birth to a very young mother. African-American children not only tend to arrive at school less academically prepared, they also tend to be less ready to conform to behavioral demands.

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 it can be done. Schools like the KIPP Academy in New York and elsewhere and South Boston Harbor Academy provide a roadmap 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 the autonomy to manage their budgets, set salaries, staff the school with fabulous teachers, and get rid of those who don't work out. Those schools focus relentlessly on the core academic subjects, insisting that students learn the times tables, basic historical facts, spelling, punctuation, the rules of grammar, and the meaning of unfamiliar words. These schools provide safe, orderly environments in which to teach and learn. They also aim to transform the culture of their students as that culture affects academic achievement.

"Are we conservative here?" Dr. 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." KIPP Academy's David Levin stakes out the same territory: "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," those are KIPP watch words, "that will enable disadvantaged youth to climb the American ladder of opportunity."

Figuring out what great schools look like is not hard. How to get there on a massive scale—that is the question to which no one has an easy answer, given the structure of public education with its built-in obstacles to the sort of fundamental reform that we believe will be needed. Will the mandatory testing and other aspects of the No Child Left Behind law help? Yes, but they will not be sufficient to alter the basic picture.

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 closed to non-Asian minorities; the perpetuation of ancient inequalities. Is that acceptable? No decent American will say yes.

## **The Problem's Causes and What to Do About It**

**Stephan Thernstrom:** We have established that there is an absolutely appalling racial gap among our students at the time they leave high school, and it's true, in fact, all through the K-12 years. This is a very serious social problem that we need to do something about.

The question is, what are its causes? First, we reject IQ explanations. Second, we reject the very common argument that it's all poverty and social class. There are very large differences of this sort in our society today. But in our statistical analyses, we accounted as best we could with somewhat im-



*Incentives for excellence in teaching are a very important part of the solution, which will be very difficult as long as we're dealing with large bureaucratic systems.*

—Stephan Thernstrom,  
No Excuses co-author

perfect data for all of those social class variables, and they do not eliminate the racial gap. The racial gap in performance between children whose parents were college graduates is wider than it is among the population in general.

It's very widely believed that there are huge racial disparities in the quality of the physical plant, in the size of the classes, in the amount spent on teachers' salaries, and on down the line. There are really two problems with this. First, those disparities do not exist on the average. Yes, there are some overcrowded, ill-funded black schools. And there are a lot of overcrowded ill-funded white schools. But if you look at the national level data, there is just about zero difference between the amount of dollars per pupil spent on black and Hispanic students on one side, and whites and Asians on the other.

Furthermore, there is no clear demonstrable relationship between per-pupil spending and levels of academic achievement. It is not clearly established that spending more money automatically does any good. We do think some of the reforms we would like to see might well cost more. But nothing is clearer from the literature: simply spending more money on the school system is unlikely to yield significant improvement.

Perhaps it is the so-called resegregation of our schools that my Harvard colleague, Gary Orfield, describes in an annual report. He looks at the level of so-called isolation measured in terms of the percentage of white students in the school of the average black student or Hispanic student. In my opinion, Orfield does show some very mild trends towards greater segregation by that limited measure. But that's only one way of looking at it.

Major demographic changes have occurred in our student population. White students were 80 percent of our public school students 30 years ago. Today, they are slightly over 60 percent. And so, by definition, the supply of whites is shrinking. You could say that a sharply increasing fraction of white and Asian students have black and Hispanic students at the schools they attend. By that measure of racial isolation, which is equally logical, the trends are quite positive. More important, though, it simply is not the case that the racial composition of the school has a clear and powerful effect on student learning.

So, if you discount all of those explanations, the other possibilities are fairly narrow. One is that there is something else wrong about these students, something about their characteristics and their family background not captured by social class measures that is holding them back. Or there is something about the environment or the quality of the school that is holding them back. We argue that there is truth in both of those propositions.

There are cultural and behavioral patterns, particularly with African-Americans, that are limiting their school achievement and need to be attacked and modified. For example, we provide astonishing figures in the book on the amount of time devoted to watching television on school days—half of all black students watch five or more hours of television on the average school day. That's part of it. We very strongly emphasize that our schools can be reformed to more successfully attack and modify those cultural and behavioral patterns.

It's clear that if black and Hispanic students had higher quality teachers, they would be doing better. We find that the usual measures of teacher quality pushed by the education establishment—mainly the percentage of teachers who have a master's degree in education and some years of experience—seem to have no demonstrable relationship to student achievement. The most powerful single indicator of a really good teacher is the level of academic skill as demonstrated on various teacher qualification tests.

However, at present, the teaching profession is structured so that there are irrational and unfortunate barriers to entry for some of the best and brightest of our young people who could well be lured into teaching if they did not have to suffer through the indignities of some years in a graduate school of education.

The incentive structure of the profession also needs to be reconsidered. There is no monetary reward for effective teaching. Some incentives for excellence in teaching are a very important part of the solution, which will be very difficult as long as we're dealing with large bureaucratic systems with union contracts that specify, in excruciating detail, exactly what teachers can be required to do.

Therefore, we make an impassioned plea for—at a minimum—more charter schools. The best schools we describe in the book are all charter schools. We also argue strongly for at least experiments with vouchers for low-income, inner-city populations like the Washington, D.C., voucher bill. We're open to argument about other ways of going about educational reform. But we strongly believe that tinkering around the edges is not going to be sufficient to really attack this very serious social problem.

## A Look at the Success of One Charter School

**Brett Peiser:** South Boston Harbor Academy Charter School is now in its sixth year. Our mission is simple, in words, to prepare each student for college; ambitious in execution, given that only about a quarter to a third of our students' parents have actually attended college; and made much more difficult given that our students come to us completely at random through a lottery.

We have been fortunate to have achieved excellent performance on the MCAS. Among our tenth graders, 100 percent passed the math and English MCAS last year, making us the only non-entrance exam public school in Boston to achieve that performance. Two years in a row, 100 percent of our seventh graders have passed the English MCAS.

I'll tell you what it is that we do. From the broadest perspective, we see it as a structural issue. The underlying feature is that a school, and the principal, must have the operational flexibility and freedom to implement its educational program. Schools don't work on broad ideas. They work on details. Those details are reflected in three pillars that exist at our school, at other schools that are profiled in *No Excuses*, and other schools here in Boston.

The first pillar is a structured academic environment. A school has to create a safe and orderly environment to ensure that teachers are teaching and the students are learning. A school must have freedom and operational flexibility in order to implement that.

Everyday, we collect all of our homework at 8:00 in the morning. Why? First, so students don't do their homework in second period for third period classes. Second, by noon, all of our teachers find out who did and didn't do their homework. Someone in the office calls every parent at work or at home to say their child didn't do their homework. On top of that, students stay an hour after school. At 5:00 every night, we record our homework on voicemail so when families get home, they can call and find out what the homework is, and then check it against what their child says they have. If you pull away any of those homework details, the school runs fine. But if you pull away the structured academic environment, you create barriers that make success a lot harder.

The second pillar is exceptional teachers. A principal must have the operational flexibility and freedom to hire and fire, to have control over personnel. In any organization, 99 percent of success comes from the people who work there. This is even more true in schools because 99 percent of what happens in school happens in the classroom.

We recruit starting in January, and we keep recruiting until August until we fill all the positions. We build a calendar that has a day off or a professional day every three weeks. There needs to be some time to reflect, and plan, and refine, and obviously take a break. It's important that teachers have the

professional time, tools, and resources and are treated like professionals. The first thing we did when we built our school was to build a teachers' office, where everyone has their own computer, voicemail, e-mail, a comfortable chair, and two hours to work there everyday. No one has more than 20 kids in a class. No one has more than four classes in their program. No one has to prepare for more than two subjects everyday. We try to make sure everybody has their own classroom.

The third pillar is truly having high academic and behavior expectations with a lot of extra support. A school has to have the operational flexibility and freedom to set its own strict promotion and retention procedures, for example. A school also has to be able to set its own policies so students really see the connection between their actions and consequences, both positive and negative.



***A school must have freedom and operational flexibility in order to create a safe and orderly environment to ensure that teachers are teaching and the students are learning.***

***—Brett Peiser, founder, South Boston Harbor Academy Charter School***

What are some of the details that manifest this pillar? One is requiring students to attend school on Saturday if they are failing. We have seen remarkable results simply by asking students to come to school for four hours on Saturday. It's a very low-cost way of addressing problems that, too often, we wait until the summer or the end of the year to address.

We also make sure that students take at least seven to 12 hours of English per week. It's such a fundamental skill—students need to be good readers and writers. It helps them be successful in science, math, history, and every other subject.

There are two things I'd like to see in the future. One is that all principals have the same flexibility and latitude to pick staff that we have. The second thing is I'd love to see some of the debate move away from money. Of course, we'd all like to have more money. But having high standards does not cost more money. Being able to have control over your personnel does not cost more money. Sometimes I wish that, instead of all the debate about money, there were people with placards saying, "More autonomy for principals! Stricter promotion and retention procedures!"

I'll close by talking about what I see as the good price that comes along with the flexibility and freedom that we have. First, knowing that the state Department of Education and site inspectors come on a yearly basis is a truly motivating factor. Second, knowing that we're being held accountable

for results in a very public way is a very motivating factor. Third, the fact that we lose money if students leave our school—because the money follows the students—is a motivating factor. Finally, knowing that you can be shut down if you don't perform is incredibly motivating. Knowing that we only exist five years at a time and that if we're not an academic success, if we're not a viable organization, and if we're not faithful to the terms of our charter, we can be closed down—that is a real motivating lever.

## Drastic Actions to Compete with Charters

**Michael Contompasis:** I agree with the Thernstroms that we in public education have been tweaking the exterior as we move toward reform. What is necessary is a huge change in the way the public schools operate. We are making progress in Boston in trying to implement reform strategies we hope will, in the long run, eliminate the achievement gap. But we've got to ratchet it up. I don't think intervention in chronically underperforming schools that takes five years is timely. If you were a CEO of a major corporation and you waited five years to turn things around, you probably would be bankrupt within a year and a half.

The number of youngsters that we currently see leaving the Boston Public Schools to attend charter schools in the area is up around 4,500. The number has reached a critical mass. For us in the public sector, it becomes necessary for us to take drastic actions, in order to meet that challenge.

I would argue that at least those schools that are underperforming ought to operate exempt from local collective bargaining agreements, provided that employees receive, at a minimum, salary and benefits that are consistent with those paid to teachers employed by the local district.

We ought to provide bonuses to good teachers who decide to go into our chronically underperforming schools and turn them around. We ought to be able to move principals into those schools. We can find the resources to provide that kind of incentive to folks who really want to take on this challenge. We have to allow these schools to formulate job descriptions for and have managerial control over all positions in the school. Those schools ought to be able to determine administrative, teaching, and other school staffing levels and structures within the budget that they are given.

Part of the problem is the model we have, particularly for secondary education. A student spends 40 minutes in math, 40 minutes in earth science, and so on, and nowhere is there a community of interest that develops around that student. Or if it does, it does so as the exception. When we talk about subdividing into smaller schools, we're talking about building a community of interest amongst the adults, where they take much more of a support approach to working with students. They should come together and talk in a collaborative

way about what's happening to the individual students in their classrooms.

We're trying to implement a model called "collaborative coaching" in many of our schools. This is where a group of professionals come together, practitioners come together, and look at what they do and how they do it.

As we develop small school communities, we must give them the authority to make decisions that are in the best interest of that school community. For far too long, they have been driven by outside sources, which tell you how many periods you can teach, how many of these you can do, and what you can do here. In the case of Boston, right now, the teacher day is six and a half hours. The actual teaching time spent at the secondary level is three and a half hours. We need to increase the workday. The idea of a Saturday school is not unique to the charters.




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We're looking at organizational structures where students who haven't been successful are allowed to move along not necessarily on a grade structure. It really should be based on how soon that student has mastered whatever the professionals feel they need to have in order to move along.

We ought to be able to be much more flexible in hiring teachers. We are now in negotiations with our teachers' union trying to reduce the amount of time it takes to hire someone. Currently, a teacher can decide on June 29th to retire June 30th. We are stuck in the summer trying to find someone. We've got to find some incentive or some penalty, some sanction, to make that a little bit more reasonable.

Why do we pay math teachers and physics teachers the same amount that we pay entering teachers in areas where there is greater supply? We need to be able to encourage those folks. We ought to be able to pay as the demand arises.

I think there is still some hope for the public schools in this country. We've got to get rid of those restrictions that inhibit flexibility and the kind of creative teaching and pedagogy that's needed in some classrooms. We've got to be able to take to heart some of these obstacles that prevent us from really making a difference.