



No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning

Stephan Thernstrom, Abigail Thernstrom

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Black and Hispanic students are not learning enough in our public schools. Their typically poor performance is the most important source of ongoing racial inequality in America today. Thus, say Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, the racial gap in school achievement is the nation's most critical civil rights issue and an educational crisis. It's no wonder that "No Child Left Behind," the 2001 revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, made closing the racial gap in education its central goal.

An employer hiring the typical black high school graduate or the college that admits the average black student is choosing a youngster who has only an eighth-grade education. In most subjects, the majority of twelfth-grade black students do not have even a "partial mastery" of the skills and knowledge that the authoritative National Assessment of Educational Progress calls "fundamental for proficient work" at their grade.

No Excuses marshals facts to examine the depth of the problem, the inadequacy of conventional explanations, and the limited impact of Title I, Head Start, and other familiar reforms. Its message, however, is one of hope: Scattered across the country are excellent schools getting terrific results with high-needs kids. These rare schools share a distinctive vision of what great schooling looks like and are free of many of the constraints that compromise education in traditional public schools.

In a society that espouses 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. When students leave high school without high school skills, their futures -- and that of the nation -- are in jeopardy. With successful schools already showing the way, no decent society can continue to turn a blind eye to such racial and ethnic inequality.

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