

improvement goals. When people believe that they are valued, they are motivated to give the best of themselves to their work. These ideas have the power to transform a struggling school into a hope-filled one where the “golden rule” is active on an administrative level for the benefit of all students and staff.

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NO EXCUSES: CLOSING THE RACIAL GAP IN LEARNING

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM & STEPHAN THERNSTROM
SIMON & SCHUSTER, 2003
\$26.00, 352 pages

Reviewed by Tamela J. Loggins

No Excuses is a detailed account of how the public education system is not only failing today's youth, but more importantly, how it is perpetuating racial inequality in this country. Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom state, “The racial gap in academic achievement is an educational crisis, but it is also the main source of ongoing racial inequality...and racial inequality is America's great unfinished business, the wound that remains unhealed” (p. 1). In 13 chapters, the authors explain why schools are failing, outline the importance of standards-based testing, describe the amazing schools that are successfully serving disadvantaged youth, present the cultural differences among minority youths, and examine the reasons why past government reforms have failed.

Chapter 1 is the driving force of the entire book. This chapter is full of provocative facts and statistics that define the racial gap in education. For example, “The average Black and Hispanic student at the end of high school has academic skills at about the eighth grade level” (p. 22). The authors further explain that while many of these students will go on to attend college, as minority college student enrollment is on the rise, great numbers will

leave before graduation because they do not have the skill or ability to complete college-level work. While sometimes repetitive, the chapter clarifies for the reader, through numerous statistics and graphs, the urgency of the issue at hand.

Chapters 3 and 4 are descriptive narratives of the rare schools across America that are successfully reforming education. The authors speak of public charter schools, which although few in number, are changing the academic culture because they are “largely independent of district control, generally able to hire nonunion teachers, and have considerable discretionary power over their budgets” (p. 44). The control of the principals and the selection of highly skilled and motivated teachers set these schools apart from regular public schools. Charter schools, such as KIPP Academy and North Star, which the authors discuss at length, are extremely disciplined, require longer school days, and hold enrollment contingent upon contracts with parents and students. These schools teach morals and ethics as part of their daily curriculum.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 discuss the cultural differences between Asians, Hispanics, and Blacks. The authors often make the distinction between Asian and non-Asian minorities, as Asians characteristically outperform other minorities on standardized tests. The Thernstroms attribute Asians’ high level of educational success to family culture. They show that this success is not, in fact, attributable to social status (i.e., parents’ income and education). It is characteristic of Asian parents to apply a great deal of pressure on their children to perform well in school, as education is a top priority; as a consequence, Asian children hold themselves to a higher standard. The authors quote a study in which students were questioned about the “trouble threshold” in their families:

What was the lowest grade they thought that they could receive without their parents getting angry? Black and Hispanic students got into trouble at home only when their grades fell below C-. For Whites it was a full grade higher, B-. But Asian students felt that receiving anything below an A- would incur parental wrath. (p. 94)

The Thernstroms claim that the statistics on Hispanic academic achievement are affected by the high level of immigration and the maintenance of the Spanish language in America. According to the authors, many Hispanic families expect to return to their homeland and do not attempt to become English-speaking Americans, nor do they place much interest in education. As for Blacks, the authors claim that it is not social class that makes the difference as many believe, but that the “cultures of groups are shaped by historical memories and are slow to adjust to new realities” (p. 121). The

Thernstroms show that the grades and test scores of Black children of middle class socioeconomic status, living in suburbia, are no better than those of their inner-city counterparts. The authors point out that the Black-White gap emerges before children even enter school, noting, "This is a gap that appears very early in the life of Black children; something about the lives of these children is limiting their intellectual development" (p. 147) whether it be parental practices, single-parent households, or low-birth weight. According to the Thernstroms, the solution to the gap is changing the family culture.

Three chapters address some of the mainstream beliefs about why schools are failing minorities: funding, racial isolation, and teacher quality. The Thernstroms provide numerous figures that show the lack of competence of many teachers. They also discuss the ways in which teacher unions have stood in the way of change and improvement for schools. The authors also claim that schools are not segregated, but are "racially imbalanced." People choose where they live, thereby choosing where their children attend school, according to the Thernstroms. But if only one third of the Black population has made it to the suburbs, then the majority of the other two thirds must be attending urban schools (and how only one third of the Black population has made it to the suburbs is another issue in itself, which the Thernstroms do not mention in their quest for racial equality). If this select group of people, the other two thirds of the Black population, were able to choose where they live, they would probably leave the inner cities and find better jobs. The authors claim that integration with Whites and attending suburban schools has no impact on the academic achievement of these minority students. However, they do point out that the most poorly educated and incompetent teachers make up the majority of those teaching in the urban schools.

In the final section of the book, the authors address government reforms of the past and present: Title I, Head Start, and No Child Left Behind. The Thernstroms present an in-depth review of the failures of previous reforms set up to improve education. The authors use Title I and Head Start to make the case that spending more money does not mean schools will improve. And while appearing to be supporters of the new reform's standards and accountability practices, the Thernstroms illustrate the argument that "No Child Left Behind will not suffice to close the racial gap" (p. 273).

The authors attend to every argument for why education is falling short in America. They leave nothing unanswered, supporting every argument they make, much of which is innovative and provocative, yet occasionally unrealistic. For example, consider the idea that "schools can do much to close the racial gap; students, however, have to do their part: coming to school on time, attending every class, listening with their full attention, burn-

ing the midnight oil” (p. 7). While most will agree with the idea that students must be responsible for themselves and their work, one must take note that a great deal of this book is focused on urban or inner-city children, many of whom will not be able to realize those responsibilities at high rates. Due to the fact that a disproportionate number of minority children come from single-parent families, dire poverty, and crime-ridden neighborhoods (which the authors do mention), these tasks will not be so simple to achieve. Furthermore, can all the statistical documentation that shows the racial gap in learning really be attributed to family culture, or are we refusing to see the true disadvantages that maintain the educational gap for Black and Hispanic children? *No Excuses* will challenge the reader to consider difficult questions such as these amidst the complex social context that frames the U.S. educational system.

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SEX, PRIESTLY MINISTRY, AND THE CHURCH

LEN SPERRY
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Reviewed by P. Del Staigers

In his book, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America*, Peter Steinfels notes that Church culture in a former era was glorified in the movies. There were 34 nominations for Academy Awards in 1943, 1944, and 1945 to honor movie heroes. Of these heroes were Father Flanagan in *Boys' Town*, Father Chuck O'Malley in *Going My Way*, and Karl Malden's labor priest in *On the Waterfront*. "There emerged a super padre, virile, wise, good-humored, compassionate, and in emergencies possessed of a remarkable knockout punch" (Steinfels, 2003, p. 71). From 1952 to 1957,