

# WELL, MAYBE *SOME* EXCUSES...

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## **No Excuses**

Closing the Racial Gap in Learning

Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom

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*Reviewed by Jared Taylor*

**E**ver since the 1960s our schools have been “in crisis,” and this perpetual crisis has loosed a flood of money and a succession of teaching fads. The federal government has spent more than \$125 billion in Title I money for poor students since 1965, and Head Start has cost more than \$60 billion. Children have struggled with “new math,” outcomes-based education, whole-word reading, computer-based learning, and a host of other gimmicks that somehow were not necessary before the 1960s. And yet the crisis grinds on.

*No Excuses*, written by Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, both of the Manhattan Institute, proposes yet another ineffective solution. Perhaps because the book ably punctures the view that what is needed is more money, and because it blasts a target it is fashionable to blast—teachers unions—and because it pins its hopes on something trendy and untested—charter schools—the book has been welcomed in some conservative circles.

At the same time, it performs a useful service in pointing out that the perpetual crisis has been about only one thing all along: race. Blacks do miserably in school, and Hispanics don’t do much better. Previous attempts to head off the crisis tried to alleviate poverty and social deprivation, but, say the Thernstroms, they missed the point. The real problem is “a frightening [racial] gap” in school performance that has been “shamefully ignored,” and treated “as a dirty secret.” It is nothing short of “a national crisis” that is “the main source of ongoing racial inequality.” Blacks and, now, Hispanics have fallen “tragically behind,” and because “racial inequality is America’s great unfinished business”... “closing the gap is the acid test of educational reform.”

The Thernstroms would never put it this way, but what they are saying is that if the United States were not trying to educate millions of blacks and Hispanics, there would be no “crisis” at all. And, indeed, before integration and “civil rights,” and before anyone had the idea blacks were supposed to do as well as whites in school, American schools worked fine, and the federal government left them alone. Even today, in schools that are still overwhelmingly white, there is nothing resembling a crisis.

Elsewhere, racial differences are stark. The average black twelfth grader is about as good at reading and U.S. history as the average white eighth grader and knows about as much math and geography as the average white seventh grader. If an employer hires a black high school graduate, it is like hiring a white eighth grader. Hispanics do a little better than blacks in math and science but are still several years behind whites. Asians are slightly behind whites in history and geography but ahead in math.

The Thernstroms devote many pages to different descriptions of the same racial differences. For example, in 1999, the average black 17-year-old knew less math than 85 percent of white 17-year-olds and less science than 90 percent of white 17-year-olds. Blacks who have graduated from college and have actually done graduate work do not read as well as whites who have had only a year or so of college. Whites who graduated from high school but never went to college do better math than blacks who have *graduated* from college and are only slightly behind blacks who have been to graduate school.

The gap starts early. As the Thernstroms note, by the time they get to kindergarten, black children’s abilities are a full standard deviation behind those of white children. Nor are the racial differences limited to academic performance. From the earliest grades, black children are much more likely than whites to get into fights and to show no interest in learning. The Thernstroms report that the standard finding is that “for every type of disciplinary problem, the incidence rose as the proportion of minority [black and Hispanic] students went up.” Students at majority-black or -Hispanic schools are sixteen times more likely to have been robbed than students at overwhelmingly white schools. Across the board, Asians are better behaved than whites, and Hispanics are more trouble than whites but not as bad as blacks.

What causes racial differences in achievement and behavior in school? The Thernstroms do a good job of refuting the usual liberal arguments. Money, they point out, is not the problem. First, study after study has shown that money doesn’t improve students’ grades, and second, as much money is spent on black and Hispanic as on white students anyway. Schools in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for example, spend an astonishing \$17,000 per year per student, and have done everything they can think of to reduce the black-white gap. They finally decided to paper over what they could not eliminate by phasing out honors courses, which blacks could not pass.

Test bias doesn't cause the racial gap either. Every question on every standardized test has been double- and triple-vetted for the faintest trace of bias; tests are now larded with questions about how many five-cent tortillas Conchita can buy for a quarter, and with reading comprehension questions about Maya Angelou's ruminations on racism.

Some people claim blacks do badly on tests because when the pressure is on, they are paralyzed by "stereotype vulnerability," that is, they are afraid that if they do poorly it will only confirm the white suspicion that they are stupid, so they clutch. The Thernstroms point out that most of their own data come from NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) testing, which takes place in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades. These are not high-stakes tests; they are no-stakes tests that have no personal consequences for students at all. Relaxed blacks should perform like champs, but they don't. Moreover, it is unlikely that fourth graders are capable of suffering from anything as elaborate as "stereotype vulnerability."

Racial segregation isn't the culprit. "Whether African-American students attended schools that were 10 percent or 70 percent black, the racial gap remained roughly the same," say the Thernstroms. There is a small number of smart blacks whose parents put them in white schools, and they do better than they would in a clapped-out ghetto school, but for most blacks, having some, many, or no white classmates doesn't affect their grades at all.

Is class size the problem? With all the money pouring into black schools, all-white schools actually have the biggest classes, and the student-teacher ratio improves as the number of blacks increases—up to a point. The trend reverses for schools in which blacks are 80 to 100 percent, but even in these schools, classes are smaller than in white schools. In any case, write the Thernstroms, "decades of research...have failed to establish that smaller classes have any measurable impact on student achievement."

Another liberal refrain is that teachers have low expectations of blacks and Hispanics, and students oblige them with bad work. The Thernstroms could track down only one serious, controlled study of expectations, and it found that teachers evaluate children exactly as one would expect: on previous grades and test scores, effort and performance in class, and the students' own reports of how well they do. This study found race had no independent effect on teacher evaluations.

In fact, when people ask students whether their teachers have high expectations of them or pay attention to what they say, blacks are more likely than whites to give good marks. If anything, white teachers bend over backwards to be fair to black students. Even in anonymous surveys, they say black students are only slightly more trouble than white students, whereas blacks who teach the same students are willing to say the black students cause much more trouble.

Even the highest expectations and most heroic back-bending achieve nothing. The Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights is famous for wooing middle-class blacks and trying to keep whites from running away. The town gives residents

low-cost housing loans to promote moves that help balance a neighborhood and even monitors the racial mix at block parties. The schools are considered among the best in the state, and at the high school everything from yearbook photos to membership on the ice hockey team is an elaborate racial balancing act. The schools are fanatical about boosting minority achievement, and the town was a founding member of the Minority Student Achievement Network. What are the results? More than half the white students passed the state proficiency test with distinction, but only four percent of the blacks did—the same low percentage as blacks in the state as a whole. Nearly 90 percent of the whites at the high school take honors or AP classes but only 30 percent of the blacks do. School authorities are baffled.

So are the Thernstroms. They flirt with the idea that blacks and Hispanics are bad students because their families are poor and that poverty perpetuates itself. It is true that children from poor families, whatever their race, do worse in school than children from rich families. However, in places like Shaker Heights, where almost all the parents, including blacks, are college graduates, the racial gap in achievement is *greater* than the average black-white gap. The higher the socioeconomic status of the families, the better children do in school, but the improvement for white children is greater than for blacks. For the two races as a whole, controlling for poverty and degeneracy—comparing socially similar blacks and whites—reduces the race gap by only about a third. The Thernstroms conclude that something else is going on, that blacks are somehow disadvantaged even before they get to school.

That, of course, was the theory behind Head Start—give black children a good sand papering before they get to school, and they will do as well as whites—but once again, the Thernstroms report bad news. Study after study has shown that the \$6,000 a year per person Head Start now costs is wasted. There is usually a brief improvement—how can there not be, when preschool children are drilled in numbers and letters rather than watch television all day?—which quickly disappears. By third grade, there is no difference in performance between black Head Start graduates and control groups that stayed home.

Studies usually show that *whites* get some permanent benefit. One researcher, for example, who compared poor whites who had gone through Head Start and those who had not, found that Head Start meant a white was 20 percent more likely to have graduated from high school and 28 percent more likely to have gone to college. No one can find similar results for blacks.

But don't blacks need black teachers as role models? The research, according to the Thernstroms, suggests that the race of a teacher has no effect on how much children learn. They did, however, find an exception: According to one recent study both whites and blacks learned better from teachers of their own race. The Thernstroms don't care for the segregationist implications of this, and say the results are "likely anomalous."

But if all the usual liberal explanations are fantasies, what causes the racial gap? Here the Thernstroms resort to fantasy of their own and insist it's all a matter of "culture." White and Asian cultures value education but black and Hispanic cultures do not. "[M]embers of some ethnic and racial groups are culturally luckier than others," explain the Thernstroms.

Having thus established that white and Asian achievement is a matter of luck, the authors assure us their cultures can be shared. The unlikely means they propose for this are charter schools, to which they devote an admiring chapter. Charter schools are exempt from the regulations and union rules that clog most public schools, and having searched the country over, the Thernstroms have found some good ones.

They are particularly taken with KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) Academies, a network of nineteen urban schools that follow a pattern established by founders David Levin and Michael Feinberg. The secret appears to be a combination of long hours, firm discipline, and dedicated teachers. The school day runs from 7:25 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., with half-days on Saturday and two weeks during the summer. This means students get 67 percent more school time than in ordinary schools. KIPP Academies have dress codes and enforce rules strictly. Unlike most public schools, they can summarily expel malefactors. There is also a certain amount of selectivity, in that parents must agree to the long hours and promise to encourage study at home, but there are no entrance examinations.

Because charter schools are exempt from teachers union hiring rules, KIPP Academies can attract young teachers so dedicated to nonwhite uplift that the Thernstroms wonder whether they are not "running for sainthood." These teachers are "missionaries with a sense of calling" who create "little islands of true heroism."

The Thernstroms are not very forthcoming with hard numbers on how the nonwhites who attend these schools compare to those who do not. Still, they claim significant gains, and they may well be right. This sort of thing, they assure us, will cure the race gap. But will it? Certainly if all blacks and Hispanics got 67 percent more hours of instruction than whites, and all their teachers were "missionaries with a sense of calling" while whites were stuck with time servers, the gap would undoubtedly narrow. Is this what the Thernstroms want? In fact, even they realize there aren't enough missionaries to go around. "If good schools require this level of idealism and energy," they wonder uneasily, "how many can there be?"

There is another problem with the Thernstrom plan. There may be a few geniuses who can get average nonwhites to perform close to the level of average whites (though this book does not report enough test scores to back that claim), but is this the best use of geniuses? Why is it more important to inspire dullards to mediocrity than to inspire the gifted to greatness? If, indeed, someone really does discover new, effective teaching methods, why should they be used for blacks and Hispanics but not for whites or Asians?

This, of course, is the temptation that comes from thinking about how to eliminate racial gaps rather than how to improve performance for everyone. Teachers have long known that all students, bright and dim, benefit from intensive, enriched education, but the bright ones benefit more than the dim ones. First-rate teaching improves everyone's performance, but the gap between the best and the worst grows larger because the best students improve the most. This is true whether the comparisons are within the same race or between students of different races.

The Thernstroms concentrate on the racial gap rather than on across-the-board improvement because they insist on ignoring the evidence that the gap is due, in large part, to genetic differences in intelligence. "The racial gap is not an IQ story," they keep insisting. In the fantasy world in which the Thernstroms live, this assertion apparently requires no justification or elaboration. Decades of testing and mountains of data can be dismissed with a wave of the hand. "Culture" accounts for racial differences. Cultures apparently drop from the sky, and good ones landed on lucky whites and Asians.

Although the Thernstroms insist that culture is transferable, blacks have been living here since 1619 and that lucky white stuff still hasn't rubbed off on them. Thousands of school districts all across America—and in Britain, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere in the white world—have been lathering nonwhites with lucky white culture, and every one of them has got it wrong. With their charter schools, though, the Thernstroms are going to do what no one else has ever managed; it would be hard to think of a more breathtaking combination of ignorance and arrogance.

Needless to say, the data with which the Thernstroms stuff their book are perfectly consistent with a genetic explanation of racial differences. More money, small classes, Head Start, integration—no environmental adjustment brings blacks up to the level of whites. The poor performance of the children of middle-class blacks, which so baffles the Thernstroms, makes perfect sense to anyone who understands population genetics. Regression to the mean drags members of all groups back from the extremes, and the children of intelligent blacks regress to a mean IQ of 85 while the children of intelligent whites regress to a mean of 100.

The Thernstroms note that blacks are far behind whites even before they get to school: "[T]he first signs of underachievement appear very early in the life of black children." "Something about the lives of these children is limiting their intellectual development," they fret, and then immediately follow with what is either appalling ignorance or deliberate deception when they write, "although scholars have not been able to pinpoint the precise reasons...."

Any attempt to boost black performance to the white level is a fool's errand, but the Thernstroms are prepared to make it a hugely disruptive and dangerous fool's errand: "[F]undamental change in American education will be necessary—change much more radical than that contemplated by the most visionary of today's school officials." They are prepared to turn American education upside down if that is what it takes to eliminate racial gaps.

Fortunately, their recommendations are not the cuckoo stuff one might expect from people who have closed their eyes to reality. They like charter schools mainly because they are free from teachers unions and think that breaking the stranglehold will leave schools free to flower. The Thernstroms report that it is not unusual for a union contract in a big city to run to three hundred pages, and they point out that “preventing change is precisely the point of the elaborate school bureaucracy.” They are probably right to say that schools are closed shops, with featherbedding, pointless requirements for credentials, meaningless regulations, and job security for incompetents. Charter schools have great freedom to hire and fire, set curricula, and enforce discipline, and as a consequence some of them are likely to be good.

And some will be awful. Deregulation means freedom to go bad as well as to do good. In April 2004 it came to light that the Mandela Academy for Science and Math in Milwaukee signed up more than two hundred students who never attended, and then cashed \$330,000 in state-issued tuition checks. Another Milwaukee charter school turned out to have been founded by a man who had served a prison term for rape. When blacks start charter schools, even if they are not outright frauds, they are likely to teach anti-white rubbish and moonshine about black pharaohs and ancient African space travelers. The Thernstrom deregulation plan could end up like Head Start: a scheme that was supposed to boost blacks benefits whites instead—and only increases the racial gap. In any case, one can predict with great confidence that neither charter schools nor anything else the bureaucrats try will reduce the racial gap.

The Thernstroms claim to have discovered a “national crisis.” They tell us we should worry about education because one third of the students in America are black or Hispanic and because white students are already minorities in California, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, Texas, and Hawaii. The Thernstroms are onto a national crisis, all right, but it is broader and more serious than they realize. They could have studied the racial gap in just about anything undesirable—illegitimacy, crime, syphilis, wife-beating, illiteracy, child abuse, drug-taking—and they would have found a “national crisis.”

The Thernstroms refuse to recognize that the problem is not education. The problem is race. We do not have a national crisis because we have a shortage of charter schools; we have a national crisis because a once-white nation is rapidly joining the Third World. Until the Thernstroms understand this, any “solutions” they propose will be just as pointless as the liberal remedies that have so clearly failed.

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