

12th National Conference on Children and the Law

ABA Center on Children and the Law

In partnership with the

Harvard Law School Child Advocacy Program

The Flawed Thinking Behind ‘No Excuses’

Richard Rothstein
The Economic Policy Institute

April 13-15, 2007
Cambridge, MA

The School Administrator Web Edition
October 2004

PUNCHBACK: ANSWERING CRITICS

The Flawed Thinking Behind 'No Excuses'

BY RICHARD ROTHSTEIN

Children's social and economic backgrounds influence their learning. Children from literate homes enter school with greater vocabularies than do children unfamiliar with books. Children with less adequate pediatric care are absent more often than healthier children. Children of college-graduate parents assume that academic excellence is their birthright, while other children struggle to achieve.



Improving the social, health and economic circumstances of families who are poor is clearly needed to close the achievement gap. Yet acknowledging the impact of social class on measured outcomes is commonly derided as "making excuses," and school leaders are bombarded with exhortations to close the gap themselves with only better leadership and curriculum, higher expectations and more accountability.

The "no excuses" refrain gains plausibility from tales of schools that "beat the odds," seeming to close score gaps between lower- and middle-class pupils simply by more effective instruction.

Skewed Notions

If these accounts were valid, educators should berate themselves alone for ongoing school inequality. But the stories typically have one of four flaws.

First, the achievement gap concerns averages, not individuals. Every human trait is distributed (often normally) around a mean. On average, middle-class children perform better, but some poor children naturally surpass typical middle-class children. A school that enrolls poor children from the top of their distribution will outperform schools enrolling representative samples, even with identical instruction.

Second, the achievement gap varies with its measurement design. A gap defined as the difference in shares of poor and middle-class pupils who pass a basic skills test will be smaller than one defined as the difference in shares of those passing harder tests. If 4th graders were tested on one-digit addition, there would be no gap because all children would pass, but if data were collected on age-appropriate skills, the gap would re-appear.

Third, all scores are statistically imprecise, bouncing around true values on successive tests because of sampling errors (every teacher knows that some years' classes are "better") or measurement errors (the flu season could be worse one year). Schools need consistent performance to prove they can close the gap.

Fourth, it is easy to confuse closing the gap with narrowing it. Certainly, some schools are better. But if every school with a gap is deemed failing, we can't identify and learn from schools that narrow it.

Simplistic Claims

Claims that some schools have closed the gap and therefore all can do so rely upon such reasoning errors. The Heritage Foundation has published lists of “No Excuses” schools, yet most of these select students from the top of the distribution of all disadvantaged students. One, for example, houses a districtwide gifted and talented program. Of course this school outperforms others with similar demographics. Others are schools of choice where more educationally motivated parents enroll their children. For others, disadvantage is defined simplistically, such as a school with graduate students' children, called disadvantaged because parents' stipends were low enough to qualify children for lunch subsidies.

The Education Trust also publishes lists of “high-flying” schools where most students are from minority or poor backgrounds and whose percents passing state tests are in the top third of their states. Some states have more such schools because their tests are simpler. Even so, most high flyers are statistical flukes. Their high passing rates are in only one subject (not reading *and* math) and one grade and for only one year. The list evaporates if we seek scores that are consistently high.

Defense Department schools often are called models for beating demographic odds in producing results. Military salaries are low and dependent children qualify for lunch subsidies, but enlistees have more education than parents of typical disadvantaged children and families have adequate health care, housing and nutrition, all factors that support learning. Commanding officers discipline parents who don't enforce proper discipline for their children. Wouldn't school superintendents like to have this authority?

Harmful Slogans

Policymakers frequently invoke slogans such as “all students can learn to the same high standards.” Some consider these incantations harmless and think they can spur teachers to raise disadvantaged students' achievement.

Sometimes such verbal whips may serve this purpose, but they also can cause great harm. They delegitimize good schools dedicated to raising minority student achievement in realistic increments. They drive out of education decent, hard-working teachers who feel inadequate to the task of reaching utopian goals or who resent the cynicism of politicians and school leaders who demand such goals be attained. And “no excuses” slogans provide respectability for those wanting to blame schools for inevitable failure.

Understanding the socio-economic factors that lower achievement is not making excuses. Rather, it identifies the social and economic policies that, in addition to school improvement, are needed to achieve equality.

Richard Rothstein, a research associate of the Economic Policy Institute and a visiting lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is the author of *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap*. E-mail: riroth@epi.org