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## **Urban Schools Need Better Teachers, Not Excuses, to Close the Education Gap**

**The truth is that America will never fix poverty until it fixes its urban schools**

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No single impediment to closing the nation's shameful achievement gap looms larger than the culture of excuse that now permeates our schools. Too many educators today excuse teachers, principals, and school superintendents who fail to substantially raise the performance of low-income minority students by claiming that schools cannot really be held accountable for student achievement because disadvantaged students bear multiple burdens of poverty. The favored solution du jour to minority underachievement is to reduce the handicap of being poor by establishing full-service health clinics at schools, dispensing more housing vouchers, expanding preschool programs, and offering after-school services like mental health counseling for students and parents. America will never fix education until it first fixes poverty—or so the argument goes.

In fact, the skeptics of urban schools have got the diagnosis exactly backward. The truth is that America will never fix poverty until it fixes its urban schools.

Antipoverty programs are, of course, an essential part of bolstering our nation's low-income families. But to argue that these programs are the primary solution for improving student achievement is mistaken. Schools can and do make a critical difference, regardless of a child's socioeconomic status. Good teachers, effective principals, and great schools have a far greater impact on the achievement gap than any out-of-school antipoverty initiative.

Is it still an educational handicap to be raised by a single mom or grandmother on food stamps? Yes. An achievement gap shows up even before children start kindergarten—and we should implement effective antipoverty programs to help these families step up the economic ladder. Yet poverty can no longer be the default excuse for giving up on low-income minority students once they start school—and all the more so now that we have an African-American president who was raised by his single mother and grandparents and whose family was forced to go on food stamps on several occasions.

Neither resources nor demography is destiny in the classroom—and no big-city school district demonstrates those truths more powerfully than the public schools in the nation's capital.

The claim that poverty trumps all in the classroom is belied by the fact that low-income black students in Washington, D.C., are academically behind low-income black students in other cities—in some cases, years behind. In 2007, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as the nation's "report card," did a special assessment in 11 big cities. The NAEP results show that low-income black fourth graders in D.C. score about 20 points lower on the NAEP than low-income black fourth graders in Charlotte, N.C., and New York City in both math and reading. To translate that gap into plain English, 10 points on the NAEP scale is roughly equivalent to an extra year of schooling—which suggests that low-income black students in the District are two years behind their black peers in Charlotte and New York City by the time they reach fourth grade.

If the academic achievement of poor black students varies substantially from district to district, the mere fact of being black and poor cannot explain why low-income black students in Washington are years behind their peers in some big cities. By contrast, if extra spending and additional resources really were the antidote for the achievement gap, black students in D.C. should handily outstrip most of their urban peers. With the exception of the Boston school district, D.C. spent more per pupil than any other of the largest 100 school districts in the 2004-05 school year, according to a 2008 report from the National Center for Education Statistics. (Those spending numbers are not adjusted for local differences in the cost of living, but Washington clearly is a well-funded big-city jurisdiction.)

It is true that no city has succeeded in eliminating the achievement gap between black and Hispanic students and white students. But a new generation of ambitious charter school networks that includes the KIPP schools, Achievement First, and the Uncommon Schools has succeeded in raising achievement levels among low-income minority students to those of white middle-class students. These new high-performing schools, often called "no-excuses schools," demonstrate that effective principals and talented teachers can create a school culture of accountability to dramatically boost minority performance.

At KIPP D.C. Key Academy, fifth graders in the first class scored at the 21st percentile in reading and the 34th percentile in math on national standardized tests when they arrived. By the time they graduated from middle school in eighth grade, the students were at the 71st percentile in reading and the 92nd percentile in math, outperforming the average white student. Three of the four top-performing middle schools for low-income students in Washington on the city's math achievement test are now KIPP schools.

Yet the response to no-excuses schools has been to make excuses about why these gap-closing schools don't really matter. These high-performing schools succeed, skeptics contend, only because the schools "cream" off the best and brightest students or have exceptionally motivated two-parent families that push kids to succeed. The first in-depth examination of these inner-city secondary schools, David Whitman's recent book, *Sweating the Small Stuff*, debunks these claims. He finds that students at no-excuses schools are typically one to two grade levels behind when they arrive and that they are not from two-

parent superstriver families.

Still, in the absence of controlled experiments with random assignment of students, skeptics of high-performing schools could continue to maintain that an unknown demographic X factor explains their success—until now. A new study by Harvard Prof. Thomas Kane and a team of researchers for the Boston Foundation shows that popular charter schools in Boston do in fact rapidly narrow the achievement gap, even after taking account of the characteristics of the students attending the charters.

The Boston Foundation study compares the growth in academic achievement of students who won charter school lotteries and enrolled in charter schools with that of lottery losers who had to remain in traditional public schools in Boston. The results suggest that the freedom conferred on charters to hire teachers and principals and to shape school culture made a huge difference in subsequent student performance. The students stuck in traditional public schools did only marginally better than their peers, but students enrolled in charter schools saw their achievement shoot up, especially in math. In a single year in a charter middle school, minority students closed half of the black-white achievement gap in math. According to Kane, charter school eighth graders' math scores were "very close" to the scores of eighth graders in Brookline, a wealthy Boston suburb.

While a demanding school culture can powerfully advance minority learning, boosting the number of top-notch teachers in inner-city schools is also critical to closing the achievement gap. As President Obama has stated, "The single most important factor in determining [student] achievement is not the color of their skin or where they come from. It's not who their parents are or how much money they have—it's who their teacher is." The impact of a bad teacher is hard to overcome by good parenting alone. One study of 9,400 math classrooms in Los Angeles in grades three through five projects that if low-income minority students could be assured of having teachers who fell in the top 25 percent of effective teachers four years in a row (in lieu of a subpar instructor), those students could close the achievement gap altogether.

School improvement may not be the only route to narrowing the achievement gap, but it is the royal road to success. Putting more resources into antipoverty initiatives with a demonstrable link to student achievement, like providing after-school tutoring and extended learning time or offering eye exams and free eyeglasses to needy students with vision problems, is a good idea. So, too, is expanding high-quality early childhood education programs, particularly as policymakers identify ways to duplicate the enduring learning gains achieved in a number of model preschool initiatives.

Still, once children reach school age, no antipoverty initiative has an impact on the achievement gap that even compares to the power of better schools. That does not mean that programs like housing vouchers or expanding the earned-income tax credit are not important or vital to reducing poverty among needy families. But the evidence shows that it is the good teacher who holds the most promise for significantly

reducing the achievement gap.

More than a decade ago, education historian Diane Ravitch warned that "we must take care not to build into public policy a sense of resignation that children's socioeconomic status determines their destiny. Public policy must relentlessly seek to replicate schools that demonstrate the ability to educate children from impoverished backgrounds instead of perpetuating (and rewarding) those that use the pupil's circumstances as a rationale for failure."

Today, it is past time to heed that advice. To close the nation's insidious achievement gap, we must replace the culture of excuse in our schools with a culture of accountability that works relentlessly to provide high-needs students with effective teachers.

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