

# LEFT BEHIND

## No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning

By Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom

*Simon & Schuster, 352 pp., \$26*

By Kim Marshall

The racial achievement gap is "an American tragedy and a national emergency for which there are no good excuses," write Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom in their meticulously documented and powerfully written book "No Excuses."

They shine a harsh spotlight on "our failure to provide first-class education for black and Hispanic students, in both cities and suburbs," and argue that the achievement gap is "the main source of ongoing racial inequality . . . the wound that remains unhealed."

With a plethora of graphs, statistics, and scholarly citations, the Thernstroms give us the brutal facts; despite Head Start and other preschool programs, most black and Hispanic youngsters enter kindergarten a year behind their white counterparts; the average black high school graduate is working at about the eighth-grade level; black college students drop out at twice the rate of whites; and things are getting worse: after narrowing somewhat in the 1970s and '80s, the gap is widening.

Why is this happening? The Thernstroms describe economic and cultural factors that handicap millions of children before they even set foot in a school: low birth weight; very young mothers with low educational attainment; single-parent homes; larger families with less individual attention for each child; more punishment than praise; fewer books in the home; more television (an average of five hours a day for almost half of all black children); and less homework completed. A telling research finding is the "trouble threshold" — the lowest grade that a child can bring home without incurring parental wrath. For most Asian children, it's an A-; for most white children, it's a B-; for most black children, it's a C-.

But the Thernstroms do not believe these factors let schools off the hook. "Family poverty is no excuse for failing to teach kids," they aver. "The values, habits, and skills that

we call 'culture' are not impervious to change. Indeed, they are shaped and reshaped by the social environment, and schools can play an invaluable part in that process.

"Parental pressure to work extraordinarily hard in school — which is the typical Asian story — is a culturally transferable trait. You don't have to be Asian to put the time into conquering algebra."

The Thernstroms are highly critical of most urban schools: "The days are too short, the year is too short, instructional time is wasted, the classrooms are chaotic, the academic expectations are woefully low, basic skills are not taught, intellectually sophisticated and stimulating material is not offered, tests are viewed as antithetical to education, and equity and excellence are seen as incompatible."

They are especially concerned with the quality of teachers. "Urban school systems . . . must find a way of attracting more smart, articulate, hardworking people, eager to teach the kids who most need academic nurturing. And they must make the job attractive to those who demand a safe, orderly, educationally committed environment in which they can actually teach, as well as time for a life outside of school."

Over the last 25 years, there have been many attempts to improve urban schools: busing students for racial integration; pouring money into schools; emphasizing Afro- or Latino-centered curriculum; increasing the number of minority teachers; reducing class size; setting up after-school programs; regulating and taking over failing schools; and introducing standards and high-stakes tests. The Thernstroms feel that none of these have even begun to close the racial gap.

What gives them hope is a small number of highly successful inner-city schools (including South Boston Harbor Academy, KIPP Academy in the Bronx, and North Star Academy in Newark). The schools they admire, all but one of them charters, share 12 characteristics: (a) strong principals with a laser-like focus on bringing all students to proficiency; (b) choice — parents and stu-

dents voluntarily commit to the school's values and standards; (c) a longer school day and year; (d) very high expectations for student behavior; (e) highly effective teachers; (f) greater hiring and firing power; (g) teacher accountability for student learning — and in some cases higher pay for outstanding results; (h) teacher teams working together to use interim results to drive improvement; (i) greater control over the budget; (j) a curriculum focused on essential skills and knowledge; (k) a strong belief that children are not just born smart — they can get smart through effective effort; and (l) the opportunity to "reboot" the school — start from scratch or radically restructure an existing school.

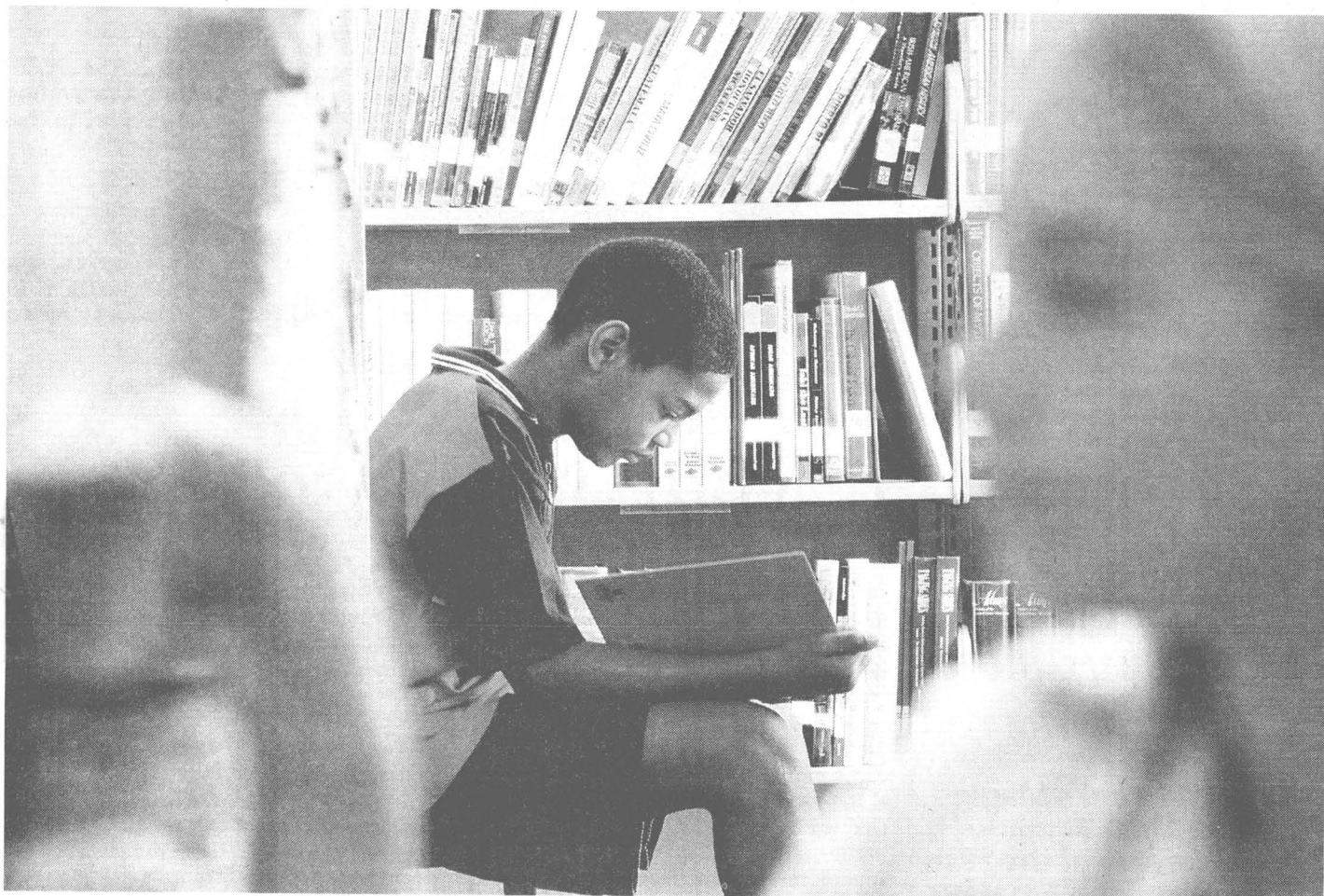
The Thernstroms' admiration for these successful charter schools, along with their great sense of urgency and their pessimism about all other solutions, leads to their two main recommendations: "charterize" all urban schools and give inner-city

## What gives them hope is a small number of highly successful inner-city schools.

parents vouchers. These ideas are not spelled out in detail and are highly controversial (especially vouchers, which raise practical problems and may violate state constitutions). On the charter idea, some would argue that the success factors listed above can be replicated in regular public schools. A very enterprising and entrepreneurial principal could conceivably implement a, d, e, h, j, and k. But the other six elements would almost certainly be out of reach because of contractual and bureaucratic barriers. These factors are critical to turning around a failing school. They would have made a huge difference in my 15 years as a Boston principal. Not having these powers is why the burnout rate among visionary school leaders is so high — and why terrific schools within urban systems are so rare.

**EDUCATION, Page G9**

*Kim Marshall, a former Boston public school teacher and administrator, is now a mentor to new urban principals.*



GLOBE FILE PHOTO

The Thernstroms warn that despite many efforts to improve urban schools, the racial gap not only remains, it is widening.

## *Black and Hispanic students trail their white counterparts from kindergarten to college, say two educators*

---

But such schools do exist. One important omission in “No Excuses” is that the Thernstroms did not visit the small number of maverick public schools that have succeeded in producing very high student achievement — the so-called 90/90/90 schools (90 percent poverty, 90 percent children of color, and 90 percent meeting high standards). A careful investigation of these schools might have shed some light on a possible noncharter route to school improvement. But even if they had looked at the 90/90/90s, they probably would have reached the same conclusion:

There are too many barriers to take their formula to scale.

If charter schools are so great, how come their track record is so mixed? Only about a third of charter schools are shining, and a third are doing worse than regular public schools. Clearly just being a charter school is no guarantee that student achievement will soar. The headaches of dealing with facilities and school management — along with difficulties holding on to first-rate staff — have bogged down many start-up schools. But there is one key difference: Char-

ter schools (and their hybrid cousins, within-the-system “pilot” schools) are much more accountable; if they do not live up to their promises, they can be shut down.

The Thernstroms are better at describing the problem and laying out a new vision than they are at presenting an action plan for getting there. But their astute analysis and provocative proposals force us to confront “the central civil rights issue of our time,” and lay this challenge before us: What are we going to do about it?