
The Racial Gap in Academic Achievement

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As early as second or third grade, [African American students] generally have much lower grades and test scores than Asians and Whites—patterns that persist over the course of their school careers.

—The College Board, “Reaching the Top: A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement”

You have to demand more of your students while providing them with the structure to meet those demands. The more difficult the curriculum, the greater the likelihood your students will be successful.

—Gregory Hodge, principal, Frederick Douglass Academy in central Harlem, New York City

IN 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois, the preeminent black intellectual of his time, described “the problem of the color line [as] the problem of the twentieth century.” And four decades later he peered sixty years down the road and saw a new century in which—for blacks—there would be nothing new.

We have, of course, arrived at that new century, and much has changed. But in certain respects, not nearly enough. Although almost half of blacks are today in the middle class, racial inequality remains a fundamental fact about American life. And much of that inequality can be traced to one source: the underachievement of black students in school. The racial gap

in cognitive skills is the nation's most serious educational problem, and its most critical race-related issue.

Most discussions of the racial gap in academic achievement contrast the scores of blacks and Hispanics to those of Asians and whites. But the Hispanic and black stories are not the same. Hispanics are a classic immigrant group. With the passage of time, their academic profile (already less worrisome than that of blacks) is likely to change. African Americans are the real concern.

Skills Matter

Educational reform is sweeping the nation. Every state, except Iowa, has developed specific learning standards, and all but three are committed to statewide tests to determine compliance with those standards in at least one core subject. Thirty-eight states have aligned their standards, curricula, and assessments in all four major subjects—English, math, science, and history. More than half the states are making high school graduation conditional upon a passing grade on a state test. The standards are often rock-bottom, but even clearly defined minimal expectations are a sharp break from the past.¹

Teachers, too, are facing tougher tests for certification, and many states have the power to assume control of a failing school, or even an entire district. Charter schools are bursting out all over; thirty-six states and the District of Columbia now have some sort of charter law. There are other reforms connected to high standards and accountability: early intervention programs, some of which target both parents and children; an end to social promotion; summer school, after-school, and Saturday programs; a variety of incentives (including free college tuition) designed to promote high achievement; summer workshops in content areas for teachers; the addition of more reading and writing to the curriculum; and much else.

Educational improvement means, above all, raising the performance of urban students, and particularly those who are black. The academic performance of black youngsters on standardized tests is worse than that

of any other group; if educational reforms do not raise black test scores, they will have failed. And if current efforts fail, a substantial percentage of African American families will remain below the poverty line. Blacks and whites today have equal high school graduation rates and nearly equal college attendance rates. Over 85 percent of both groups finish four years of high school (although not necessarily by age eighteen), and among those who obtain a high school diploma, 60 percent of blacks (versus 68 percent of whites) go directly into college. But blacks and whites do not leave the twelfth grade equally well educated, and thus they do not have the same college graduation rates or the same earnings down the road.

Blacks are more likely to earn a college diploma than whites with the same twelfth-grade test scores.² And blacks earn no less than whites when they are equally academically prepared. There is much talk in the media and elsewhere about the rich getting richer and the poor becoming poorer. In fact, it is those with skills who are doing well economically. In recent decades, earnings for low-skilled work have declined, while those for jobs that require a good command of language and numbers, as well as the ability to analyze complicated problems, have risen dramatically.³

Thus, it is actual knowledge—not years spent in school warming a seat—that makes the difference in an individual's income. What often looks like discrimination is better described as rewarding workers with relatively strong cognitive skills. One study of men twenty-six to thirty-three years old who held full-time jobs in 1991 found that when education was measured in the traditional way (years of school completed), blacks earned 19 percent less than comparably educated whites. But when the yardstick was how well they performed on basic tests of vocabulary, paragraph comprehension, arithmetical reasoning, and mathematical knowledge, the results were reversed. Black men earned 9 percent more than white men with the same education—as defined by skill.⁴

Other studies contain similar findings. Among men thirty-one to thirty-six years old whose cognitive skills put them above the 50th percentile on the well-respected Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test, the difference between black and white earnings is a mere 4 percentage

points, Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips report in a Brookings Institution volume on *The Black-White Test Score Gap*.⁵ A 1999 College Board report came to much the same conclusion: “Differences in job performance ratings and wages among people with similar educational credentials are related in part to differences in academic achievement and skills levels, as measured by standardized test scores, class rank in college, and even high school grades or test scores.” Other factors do come into play—“motivation, perserverance,” even “plain old luck,” it went on. White racism, however, was not on the list.⁶

Scary Numbers

Test scores matter, and those for blacks and whites, on average, are not the same. For a while the rate of progress was heartening. During the 1970s and the better part of the 1980s, black school children were making more rapid gains than whites on the standardized tests administered periodically to a representative sample of students by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). NAEP results are often called the nation’s report card on education, and in 1971, when the tests were first given, the average African American seventeen-year-old could read no better than the typical white eleven-year-old. By 1988, the gap had been narrowed to just 2.5 years, still too large but less than half of what it had been sixteen years before. Math and reading tests are given in different years, but the data are similar. In 1973, black students were 4.3 years behind their white peers; in 1990, the difference was down to just 2.5 years.

Toward the end of the 1980s, however, black progress came to a halt. Scores began to go down. By 1996, the racial gap in math of 2.5 years in 1990 had grown to 3.4 years. The average African American high school senior thus had math skills precisely on a par with those of the typical white student in the middle of ninth grade—a huge disparity in a world in which numeracy is becoming at least as important as literacy.

The reading scores are even more dismaying. Although the black-white gap closed by a remarkable 3.5 years between 1980 and 1988, it widened

by more than a year and a half in the following decade, erasing half of the previous gain. As a result, in 1998 the average seventeen-year-old African American could only read as well as the typical white child who had not yet reached age thirteen. In 1992, just 18 percent of black students in twelfth grade were rated “proficient” or “advanced” in reading, as compared with 47 percent of whites. As of 1998, those numbers were unchanged.

Backsliding is evident in both science and writing as well. In the decade following 1986, the science gap widened by a half a year, and between 1988 and 1996, the difference between white and black scores on the writing assessment increased by 1.2 years. The most recent data thus show black students in twelfth grade dealing with scientific problems at the level of whites in the sixth grade and writing about as well as whites in the eighth grade.

The Middle-Class Puzzle

The racial gap in academic skills is a problem that starts before kindergarten and affects black youngsters from every social class. Thus, the median scores of black and white five- and six-year-olds who took the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test in the years 1986–1992 were quite different.⁷ In an essay in *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, Meredith Phillips and colleagues estimate that about half the difference between white and black twelfth-grade students is explained by the gap that is already evident in first grade.⁸ Could that gap be eliminated by better schooling? No one knows for sure. But schools scattered across the landscape are beating the demographic odds—educating children from whom regular public schools expect less.

More discouraging, because it’s more bewildering, is the poor academic performance of middle-class black students. Shaker Heights is a tony Cleveland suburb; its black residents are well-to-do. And its schools, as of 1998, were pouring nearly \$10,000 a year into educating every child. It has had a rich program aimed at raising the level of black achievement. Successful black students mentor those doing poorly in the earlier grades;

tutors work with small groups of kindergarten children who need help reading; after-school, weekend, and summer academies are open to those who want to attend; special high school classes are available for those who do not keep up; a high school counselor works with youngsters whose grades do not reflect their potential; and so forth. The results have the school administrators totally baffled. About half the students in the Shaker Heights school system are black, but blacks are 7 percent of those in the top fifth of their class, and 90 percent of those in the bottom fifth.⁹

“At virtually all socioeconomic levels,” black students do not perform as well as those who are white or Asian, the College Board’s recent task force report acknowledged. In fact, the racial gap in academic achievement is widest among middle-class students from educated families; the NAEP scores of black and white youngsters whose parents lack even a high school degree are more alike.¹⁰ The SATs, too, paint a dismal picture. In 1995, black students from families in the top income bracket—\$70,000 and up—were a shade behind whites from families earning less than \$10,000 on the verbal assessment and significantly behind them in math.¹¹

Trash the Tests

Many educators, policy makers, and others argue, of course, that staring at these numbers is a fundamentally misguided way of looking at the question of black academic achievement. Test scores tell us little, they say, and should never be used to decide who moves up a grade, attends summer school, or graduates. Their disparate racial impact “should be cause for further inquiry and examination,” the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR) contends. In draft guidelines issued in December 1999, it warned states and local school districts that they must be prepared to defend their “high stakes” tests in federal court. Low scores may reflect limited educational opportunities; if so, decisions that rely upon test performance are “problematic”—that is, discriminatory. Numerical cut-off scores on a statewide test as a condition of graduation are particularly suspect.¹²

OCR's views square with those of many who identify themselves as members of the civil rights community. Christopher Edley Jr. was President Clinton's main advisor on race for a number of years; the guidelines, he said, protect students from "harsh high-stakes sanctions."¹³ In a resolution approved on November 19, 1999, the NAACP came out against the use of SAT and ACT exams for purposes of college admission on the grounds that they are racially biased and a poor indicator of success in college.¹⁴ In doing so, it ignored much evidence that, in fact, the SAT overpredicts black college grades; black students tend to do worse than their test scores suggest they should. The tests are indeed biased—in favor of black students.¹⁵

In 1999, the Educational Testing Service, too, took a swipe at the SATs for which it is ultimately responsible. When kids are from disadvantaged households—as measured by a host of possible criteria—SAT scores should be adjusted to reflect the hurdles they must overcome, ETS tentatively suggested in September 1999. A score of 1,000 should be read as 1,200 if the student is black, for example, and has thus outperformed the black average.¹⁶ The arguments of both the NAACP and ETS logically apply to all tests at every grade level. If standardized assessments are biased and therefore misleading, then grades should be adjusted. On an eighth-grade math test, a Hispanic's "B" is really an "A." Scores are not scores. They are numbers to be read within a demographic context. And the uniformly high academic expectations that are integral to standards-based educational reform are a grave mistake.

That is certainly what Jonathan Kozol, a well-known writer on education, believes. The increasingly popular statewide tests, he has declared, evoke memories of "another social order not so long ago that regimented all its children . . . to march with pedagogic uniformity, efficiency, and every competence one can conceive—except for independent will—right into Poland, Austria, and France, and World War II."¹⁷ Deborah Meier, the much-celebrated founder of the Central Park East schools in New York City, condemns standardized tests as failing to "measure the only important qualities of a well-educated person." "Life scores [not math scores] based on living" should be the educator's concern, she has written.¹⁸ Theodore

Sizer, former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is also opposed to the entire standards-based educational package. “The myriad, detailed and mandatory state ‘curriculum frameworks,’ of whatever scholarly brilliance, are attacks on intellectual freedom,” he says. “High stakes tests arising from these curricula compound the felony.”¹⁹

Kozol, Meier, Sizer, and their allies have many fans, including most members of the faculty at the leading graduate schools of education. U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone has introduced legislation to ban standardized tests from being used as the sole criterion for grade promotion and high school graduation.²⁰ But they seem to be fighting a losing war. Powerful currents are pushing education in a different direction. Asked in a 1999 poll whether they had “respect and confidence” in public schools, only 36 percent of Americans said they had a “great deal/quite a lot of confidence.” A year earlier 59 percent had listed low academic standards as a “very serious concern,” with another 29 percent choosing “somewhat serious.” Moreover, polling by the nonpartisan Public Agenda in the winter of 1997–98 revealed that 78 percent of black parents agreed that testing “calls attention to a problem that needs to be solved.”²¹

Peter Sacks, the author of a recent book on testing, dismisses those who support testing as part of a “conservative backlash advocating advancement by ‘merit,’” but important advocates for black and Hispanic children have joined the standards crusade.²² Ramon C. Cortines, formerly the interim superintendent of schools in Los Angeles, recently called the attack on assessments “insidious racism” on the part of those who “want the status quo.”²³ To ignore the information that tests provide, in other words, is to perpetuate a system that has been historically indifferent to the fate of black and Hispanic students. The Education Trust is a Washington, D.C., organization devoted to promoting academic achievement among blacks, Hispanics, and low-income children. “Traditionally, of course, most advocates for such children have shied away from high standards and high stakes,” Kati Haycock, the director, has written.²⁴ But she is unequivocal in her demand for no-nonsense standards with uncompromising consequences

for those who fail to meet them. “Backing off from testing would just kick the problem of low student achievement under the rug again,” she has said.²⁵

Peter Sacks talks about the “stigma of poor performance on mental tests.”²⁶ But Kati Haycock and those behind the drive for state educational reform are more fearful of the consequences of letting schools ignore the racial gap in academic achievement. That fear has prompted New York, Texas, and California to consider racial and ethnic data in ranking public schools. In New York, for instance, beginning with 2001, the performance of black and Hispanic students in each school will be reported, and schools with a large racial gap in academic performance won’t earn a good grade. Thus, an affluent suburb in which the average score on the statewide tests is high will be penalized if that average masks group differences.²⁷

New York and other states are rejecting the notion of racial double standards—lower academic expectations for non-Asian minorities. The job of educators is to close the racial gap, they say; the tests tell a story that America ignores at its peril. The scores cannot be fudged with formulas that adjust for “disadvantage” and suggest that black children cannot keep up with their Asian peers.

An Unsolved Mystery

Why do so few black students graduate from high school with strong academic skills? Black poverty, racial segregation, and inadequate funding for predominantly black schools are standard items on the list of explanations. None withstands close scrutiny. Income inequality, for instance, appears to play only a very small role in black test performance. The rise in scores after 1970 came at a time when the poverty rate was not changing significantly.²⁸ And when that educational progress halted, black poverty was not on the increase. In fact, Jencks and Phillips conclude, eliminating black-white income disparities would make almost no difference in the score of young black children on a basic vocabulary test. (They

focus exclusively on black-white differences, ignoring the roughly similar gap between blacks and Asians.)

The huge rise in out-of-wedlock births, precipitating the steep and steady decline in the proportion of black children growing up with two parents, might seem important in explaining educational performance of African American children. Children raised in single-parent families do less well in school than others, even when all other variables, including income, are controlled.²⁹ But marriage, per se, appears to make little difference. “Once we control a mother’s family background, test scores, and years of schooling,” Jencks and Phillips conclude, “whether she is married has even less effect on her children’s test scores than whether she is poor.”³⁰ Moreover, the disintegration of the black nuclear family, noted by Daniel Patrick Moynihan as early as 1965, was occurring rapidly in the period in which black scores were rising.

Do urban schools—which a majority of black youngsters attend—lack the resources needed to educate children properly? Spending on education has risen dramatically in recent decades, and those new dollars have gone disproportionately to schools with high concentrations of economically disadvantaged children.³¹ Contrary to widespread popular belief, there is little difference in average expenditures per pupil in central cities and suburbs.³²

Nor does a school’s racial mix matter after the sixth grade; it seems to affect reading scores only in the early years and math scores not at all. Scores went up from the early 1970s to the late 1980s when courts were instituting busing plans, but black students who remained in predominantly African American schools showed as much improvement as those attending integrated schools.³³ Moreover, the slide in black scores beginning in 1988 does not coincide with increasing racial isolation.³⁴

The number of teachers per student, their credentials, and pay are also unaffected by the racial identity of the children in a district, Jencks and Phillips show. Schools that are mostly black, however, have teachers with lower test scores—in part because black schools have more black teachers,

they forthrightly acknowledge. In addition, to the extent that schools substitute “critical thinking” for factual knowledge, those who come to school from homes that impart very little in the way of academic skills are likely to be further disadvantaged, a problem that is further compounded when, in the name of racial sensitivity, little is expected of black children.³⁵ Moreover, disorder in the classroom is a sure recipe for little learning.³⁶

Good Schools Get Good Results

Many will argue, of course, that politicians, state boards of education, and often the public are asking too much of schools. And solid scholars like Jencks and Phillips make a strong case that “cognitive disparities between black and white preschool children are currently so large that it is hard to imagine how schools alone could eliminate them.” Those skills will improve when we change the way black parents “deal with their children.”³⁷ They suggest that social scientists take a close look at: “the way family members and friends interact with one another and the outside world”; “how much parents talk to their children, deal with their children’s questions, how they react when their child learns or fails to learn something”; “cultural and psychological differences.”³⁸

Pessimism is seductive, but good schools with impressive results scattered across the nation suggest that educational mediocrity is the central problem. All the students at the KIPP Academy, a South Bronx public school for grades 5 through 8, are from very low-income black or Hispanic families. As the school’s literature acknowledges, in the neighborhood in which these youngsters live “illiteracy, drug abuse, broken homes, gangs, and juvenile crime” are rampant. But KIPP has the highest reading and math scores of any middle school in the entire Bronx—despite the fact that two-thirds arrive in fifth grade unable to read. In math, last year, it ranked fifth in all of New York. Its daily attendance record of 96 percent is one of the highest in the whole state.³⁹

KIPP’s success is no mystery. All great schools have fabulous leadership,

and KIPP is the brainchild of David Levin, the director, who started out as the partner of Michael Feinberg, running a sister school in Houston. The school day runs from 7:30 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., with four hours of classes on Saturdays and three weeks of mandatory attendance in the summer. (The package adds up to 67 percent more time in the classroom than the national average.) Those who chronically do not finish their homework stay even later. Teachers are available on a toll-free cell phone number from the moment they leave the school until they arrive the next morning, and many receive ten to fifteen calls a night.

KIPP aims both to prepare students for college and to change peer culture. As the school counselor put it, “We nurture feeling good about being a nerd; we tell the students, you can play basketball and read books too.” Levin adds: “We train kids to look at people and talk to them. Every moment in class, teachers are role models, treating kids with respect. They dress properly. Everything about the school is designed to teach. I never walk by a student without saying hello.” He knows the name of every student, speaks Spanish, and thus can talk directly to Hispanic parents with limited English.

KIPP parents sign a contract that commits them to getting their kids to school on time, helping their children to the best of their ability, and so forth. Parents know how their kids are doing through a system of student “paychecks” that also reward the students directly. Checks (in KIPP dollars) are issued weekly on the basis of teacher evaluations in ten specific areas of performance—including dress. Once a parent has endorsed the check, it can be redeemed at the school store for books, supplies, and even CDs.

Performance is linked to awards in other ways as well. Students who get 100 on a test see their names up on the classroom bulletin board. Students of the month are listed. “You can’t have students feeling good about nothing,” Levin says. “We make kids feel successful over little things . . . writing a complete sentence.”

Not a minute of the KIPP day is wasted. When students arrive in the morning, they pick up worksheets with problems to solve while teachers

are correcting homework or are otherwise occupied. If they have five minutes, they do five minutes of work. Every class is structured, and the walls are plastered with posters that, for instance, walk students through the process of writing. (Think about what you want to say, organize your thoughts, write a draft, revise, proofread.) Other posters go through the definition of an independent clause and other rules of grammar. At every grade level, students write and write and write.

The messages the school delivers on its walls and through its teachers are integral to its success. The guidance counselor talks about the dangerous culture of the streets. Everywhere there are encouraging signs: “There Are No Shortcuts”; “No Excuses”; “Be Nice!!! Work Hard!!!”; “All of Us Will Learn”; and “True Champions Always Work Hard.” Other celebrated schools tell children they are loved; KIPP says something more important: self-discipline and civility will get you where you want to go.

The KIPP students I spoke to all described their previous schools as places to which they would never want to return. As one young boy put it: “We have a closer relationship with our teachers here. We all get along. There is no fighting. We learn more. In my other school, the teachers didn’t care that much.” A girl added: “In my old school . . . there were three fights every day. Here you would get in trouble for fighting. Why would a college want someone who doesn’t behave?”

KIPP’s demand that parents sign a contract of cooperation means the school, to some extent, chooses its students. And that choice is probably integral to its success. The many parochial schools that have a track record of success with black and Hispanic children also have students whose parents want them to be there.⁴⁰ But most of these same youngsters in a different educational setting would not be flourishing academically, it seems safe to say. Schools do make a difference, but they need a minimal level of parental cooperation. Michael Feinberg at Houston’s KIPP believes nine out of ten low-income parents in the community with which he works would sign the contract.⁴¹

The American Project

“The moral pulse” beats more strongly in America than in Europe, the great Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal noted in 1941.⁴² It was a theme he often returned to. The country is “continuously struggling for its soul,” he wrote in his classic 1944 work, *An American Dilemma*.⁴³

Myrdal did Americans the honor of taking seriously their commitment to liberty, equality, justice, and fair opportunity. “The Negro problem,” in his view, was a moral issue over which even ordinary Americans brooded in their thoughtful moments. It may not have been true then, more than half a century ago, but it is true now. Myrdal’s was a prescient voice. Today, most Americans care about racial equality. In a land of plenty, they do not want African Americans left out—second-class citizens, a deprived nation within our nation. Racial equality is a moral commitment from which few dissent.

But until the day on which blacks and whites are equally well educated, that equality will remain a dream. The good news is that most eyes are now on K–12 schooling. Can we fix the schools? If KIPP and other such schools (woefully few in number) provide ground for hope, they also deliver a sobering message: most public school systems are an obstacle course that only the most extraordinary principals can negotiate. Closing the racial gap in academic achievement will require radical educational reform against which there will be much resistance. But if racial equality is the persistent American dilemma, it is also the American project. And thus, down a long road, schools will be forced to change.

Notes

1. This information on the number of states instituting reform, etc., is taken from the American Federation of Teachers’ most recent annual report, *Making Standards Matter, 1999*, available only on the AFT Web site (<http://www.aft.org>). The report notes that “historically, states and districts haven’t organized curriculum around a clearly defined set of expectations, nor have they developed assessment systems that measure whether students are meeting rigorous, publicly available standards.” The AFT’s 1999

report lists twenty-two states as meeting the organization's criteria for standards that are academically solid, a sharp rise from only three the year before.

2. Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, eds., *The Black-White Test Score Gap* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1998), pp. 7, 8, figs. 1–4.

3. See Richard J. Murnane and Frank Levy, *Teaching the New Basic Skills: Principles for Educating Children to Thrive in a Changing Economy* (New York: Free Press, 1996). A more detailed technical version of their analysis is available in Richard Murnane, John Willett, and Frank Levy, "The Growing Importance of Cognitive Skills in Wage Determination," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 77 (1995): 251–66.

4. George Farkas and Keven Vicknair, "Appropriate Tests of Racial Wage Discrimination Require Controls for Cognitive Skills: Comment on Cancio, Evans, and Maume," *American Sociological Review* 61 (August 1996): 557–60. This is a critique of A. Silvia Cancio, T. David Evans, and David J. Maume, "Reconsidering the Declining Significance of Race: Racial Differences in Early Career Wages," in the same issue of the *American Sociological Review*, pp. 541–56, which had measured education crudely by levels of schooling completed. The authors' rejoinder to this critique (*ibid.*, pp. 561–64) argues that it is inappropriate to control for education by using tests of cognitive skills because those tests are biased and really only test "exposure to the values and experiences of the White middle class" (p. 561). Employers are apparently guilty of class and racial bias if they want employees to be able to read a training manual or to calculate how many bags of grass seed and fertilizer the customer will need to make a lawn that is 60 feet long or 40 feet wide.

5. Jencks and Phillips, p. 6.

6. "Reaching the Top: A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement," College Board, 1999, p. 4.

7. Meredith Phillips et al., "Family Background, Parenting Practices, and the Black-White Test Score Gap," in Jencks and Phillips, eds., *Black-White Test Score Gap*, chap. 4. The entire chapter is an analysis of the PPVT and other data bearing on the relation between young children's cognitive skills and family background.

8. Meredith Phillips, James Crouse, and John Ralph, "Does the Black-White Test Score Gap Widen After Children Enter School," in *ibid.*, p. 232.

9. Michael A. Fletcher, "A Good-School, Bad-School Mystery: Educators Striving to Close Racial Gap in Affluent Ohio Suburb," *Washington Post*, October 23, 1998, p. A01.

10. The College Board's contrast is actually between white and Asians on the one hand, blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans on the other. But the performance of Hispanics (and Native Americans) is a topic for another essay.

11. College Entrance Examination Board, *1995 National Ethnic/Sex Data*, unpaginated.

12. The OCR draft guidelines, entitled "Nondiscrimination in High-Stakes Testing: A Resource Guide," were first issued on May 17, 1999. They came close to equating

disparate impact and discrimination, intimating that high-stakes tests of any sort could be used only if the consequences of getting a low score would not be the same for blacks and Hispanics as for whites and Asians. In mid-December a revised and softened version was leaked to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Patrick Healy, "Education Department Softens Its Tone in Latest Draft of Guide to Using Test Scores in Admissions," Dec. 13, 1999); as this essay is being written, the full text is not available.

13. Patrick Healy, "Affirmative Action Defenders Push Colleges to Back Draft Guidelines on Testing," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 25, 1999, p. A42. Edley's ringing defense of the guidelines referred to the harsher version issued in May.

14. Julie Blair, "NAACP Criticizes Colleges' Use of SAT, ACT," *Education Week*, December 1, 1999, p. 10.

15. William G. Bowen and Derek Bok, *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), is a brief on behalf of racial preferences and thus argues for the admission of black and Hispanic students with academic credentials weaker than those of their Asian and white peers accepted to highly competitive schools. Nevertheless, the authors acknowledge the underperformance of black college students relative to their SAT scores: "The average rank in class for black students is appreciably lower than the average rank in class for white students *within each SAT interval*. . . . It is one strong indication of a troubling phenomenon often called 'underperformance.' Black students with the same SAT scores as whites tend to earn lower grades"; p. 77, italics theirs.

16. News of what ETS called its "Strivers" program surfaced in the *Wall Street Journal* on August 31, 1999, and was subsequently picked up by other publications. It was an unfinished project, although ETS was willing on the record to discuss the central idea. For more detail, see "The End of Meritocracy: A Debate on Affirmative Action, the S.A.T., and the Future of American Excellence" between Nathan Glazer and Abigail Thernstrom, *New Republic*, September 27, 1999, pp. 26–29.

17. Deborah Meier, *Will Standards Save Public Education?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), foreword by Jonathan Kozol, p. xi.

18. Meier, *ibid.*, p. 85.

19. TheodoreSizer, "A Sense of Place," responding to Meier, *ibid.*, p. 72.

20. Rob Hotakainen, "Calling Graduation Tests Harsh, Wellstone Offers Alternative Plan," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, April 4, 2000, p. 1A.

21. The "respect and confidence" question was asked in a 1999 Gallup poll; the judgment about "low academic standards" was made in response to a Peter D. Hart Research Associates 1988 survey; Public Agenda polled employers in 1988. The poll of black parents is reported in Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson, "Time to Move On: African-Americans and White Parents Set an Agenda for Public Schools," A Report from Public Agenda, 1998, p. 17.

22. Peter Sacks, *Standardized Minds: The High Price of America's Testing Culture and What We Can Do About It* (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus, 2000), p. 6.

23. Todd S. Purdum, "A 'Pied Piper' Is Shaking Up the Schools in Los Angeles," *New York Times*, April 15, 2000, p. A7.

24. "Ticket to Nowhere: The Gap Between Leaving High School and Entering College and High-Performance Jobs," in *Thinking K-16* (a publication of the Education Trust) 3, no. 2 (fall 1999): 2.

25. Letter to the *New York Times*, April 16, 2000, sect. 4, p. 14.

26. *Standardized Minds*, p. 5.

27. Kate Zernike, "Regents Vote to Rank Schools, Weighing Performance of Minority Students," *New York Times*, May 5, 2000, p. A23.

28. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, pp. 60–189, *Income, Poverty, and Valuation of Noncash Benefits: 1994* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996), table B-6.

29. See Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

30. Jencks and Phillips, *Black-White Test Score Gap*, p. 10 and chap. 4.

31. Between the 1969–70 school year and 1995–96, nationwide expenditures per pupil (in constant '95–'96 dollars) rose from \$3,337 to \$6,146, a gain of 84 percent. In the same period, per capita income (in constant dollars) rose by only 46 percent; *1998 Digest of Educational Statistics*, p. 183; *1998 Statistical Abstract of the United States*, p. 476. Since the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, the federal government has spent \$118 billion on making sure poverty ceased to be "a bar to learning"—although with results no one celebrates. For an excellent discussion of Title I of the ESEA, see George Farkas, "Can Title I Attain Its Goal?" paper prepared for presentation at a Brookings Institution conference, May 17, 1999.

32. National Center for Education Statistics, *Disparities in Public School District Spending, 1989–1990*, NCES 95-300 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995), p. 15. William N. Evans has also tabulated census data for 1972, 1982, and 1992 and concluded that the average black student and average white student both live in districts that spend just under \$5,400 per pupil. Evans, Sheila Murray, and Robert Schwab, "School Houses, Court Houses, and State Houses After Serrano," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, January 1997, pp. 10–31.

33. David J. Armor, *Forced Justice: School Desegregation and the Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 92–98.

34. On the stability of de facto segregation, see *America in Black and White*, chap. 12.

35. E. D. Hirsch Jr., *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), pp. 43, 54. Shelby Steele has made the point with particular eloquence about low expectations packaged as racial sensitivity. Even minimal academic

demands, he argues, are often stymied by a deep and painful sense of “racial vulnerability” that whites and blacks share. The vulnerability of whites is to the charge of racism, that of blacks is to the claim of inferiority. In different ways both are wracked by powerful doubts about their own self-worth. See “The Race Not Run,” *New Republic*, October 7, 1996, p. 23. *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990) makes the argument at much greater length.

36. On chaos and violence in the schools, see Abigail Thernstrom, “Courting Disorder in the Schools,” *Public Interest* 136 (summer 1999): 18–34.

37. Jencks and Phillips, eds., pp. 24, 45, 46. The College Board task force also refers to the “cultural attributes of home, community, and school” and talks at length about the attitudes toward school and toward hard work that Asian parents transmit to their children. “Reaching the Top,” pp. 14, 17–18.

38. Jencks and Phillips, eds., p. 43.

39. All the information on KIPP comes from the author’s three visits to the school, from the literature the school provides, and from Samuel Casey Carter, *No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing High-Poverty Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, 2000).

40. Scholars have been looking closely at the record of Catholic schools for decades; there is solid research tracing the sources of their success with inner-city students. See, for instance, Anthony S. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, and Paul B. Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); James S. Coleman and Thomas Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities* (New York: Basic Books, 1987). All the experimental voucher programs are being carefully watched as well. For a summary of the evidence on vouchers as of 1998, see the collection of essays in Paul E. Peterson and Bryan C. Hassel, eds., *Learning from School Choice* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1998).

41. Personal communication with Michael Feinberg.

42. Quoted in Walter A. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience: Social Engineering & Racial Liberalism, 1938–1987* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 151. The quotation was from *Kontakt med Amerika*, a book co-authored with Myrdal’s wife, Alva, but Jackson attributes the sections on race solely to Gunnar Myrdal.

43. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York: McGraw-Hill paperback ed., 1964), p. 4.