

# **CAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS SAVE AMERICA?**

***Culture, Race, Academic Achievement,  
and the American Dream***

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**PEDRO A. NOGUERA**, *City Schools and the American Dream: Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2003, 187 pages, ISBN: 0-8077-4382-8, Cloth, \$50.00, and 0-8077-4381-X, Paper, \$19.95.

**JENNIFER HOCHSCHILD AND NATHAN SCOVERONICK**. *The American Dream and the Public Schools*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, 301 pages, ISBN: 0-19-515278-6, Cloth, \$35.00.

**DAVID TYACK**, *Seeking Common Ground: Public Schools in a Diverse Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, 237 pages, ISBN: 0-674-01198-8, Cloth, \$22.95.

**ABIGAIL THERNSTROM AND STEPHAN THERNSTROM**, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003, 334 pages, ISBN: 0-7432-0446-8, Cloth, \$26.00, and 0-7432-6522-X, Paper, \$15.00.

The last two decades have witnessed increased concerns regarding cultural, moral, political, and economic divisions in the United States. With heightened distress about cultural divides, moral decay, growing ethnic diversity, and the now infamous divide between “red and blue” states, scholars and political leaders look increasingly to the public schools to salvage a nation otherwise split along economic, political and ethnic lines. Although David Tyack, in *Seeking Common Ground: Public Schools in a Diverse Society*, reminds us that the pursuit of national unity through public education

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always has been an impossible dream, each American generation continues to hope that public schools can educate children who do not share common backgrounds in a common sense of nationhood and democratic principles. The long-standing belief in public education as the essential foundation of equality and democratic culture raises an obvious question: can public schools save America from the sharp divisions in our economic, political, cultural, and social experiences? Put another way, in view of major fault lines in the everyday political economy, can and ought schools shoulder the burden of constructing a common national culture and identity out of a fractured nation?

Even while recognizing the American Dream as “a brilliant ideological invention,” that in practice “leaves much to be desired,” Jennifer Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick are convinced that public schools have an obligation to teach all children a common core of values and to prepare them to realize the fruits of the “American Dream” (p. 15). The authors define the “American Dream” as having enough money to care for oneself and family, freedom and opportunity to choose one’s life course, good family relationships and friends, a meaningful job, and being useful to society. To enable students to achieve the American Dream, according to Hochschild and Scovronick, teachers must provide students with a *common core of knowledge* and teach them “the common history and ideas that tie all Americans together” (p. 15). Hence, public schools should “promote cultural unity among all Americans.” “If they do not learn in public schools to develop shared commitments as well as appreciation for differences, children are unlikely to learn it anywhere else in American society,” the authors maintain (p. 175). They stress not only the necessity of public schools to forge an ideology of national unity, but Hochschild and Scovronick are also opposed to the teaching of any ethnic history and culture that might challenge or reject the national ideology that they call the American Dream. In their view, experiences and beliefs that might challenge or reject the American Dream should be relegated to the arenas of home, churches, and community organizations. As they put it, “public schools cannot have a mission to enable groups to define themselves separately from the rest of the American society” (p. 180). Hence, public schools, while inculcating the ideology of the American dream, should not serve as a forum for ethnic, class, or religious challenges to that ideology.

Clearly, we are obligated to consider different perspectives on this question, especially since the proposed objective amounts to nothing less than inculcating in young children an ideology that even the authors recognize as leaving much to be desired in practice. It is neither good history nor good pedagogy to assert the existence of a common national unity rooted in the nation’s past and then proceed to teach such views to schoolchildren as though they were self-evident truths. Even if some take for granted the existence of a common past and a common national creed or set of cultural norms, the “taken-for-granted” is the very thing that good history and good pedagogy should interrogate. Hochschild and Scovronick assert, “[p]ublic schools will need to transmit a common American culture, rooted in the history of this nation and based on English” (p. 198). Still, the question of what common unity different social classes and ethnic groups have that is “rooted in the history of the nation,” is a factual premise to be tested by historical evidence, not an ideology to be imposed for the sake of shared commitments and cultural unity. In short, the national experience should be written as a larger, complex synthesis, emphasizing conflicts, contradictions, as well as common ground rooted in the nation’s past. The nation’s past is characterized by different and conflicting American Dreams, not by surveys of what we want in the present. From 1619 to 1865, virtually half the states and vast segments of the American population saw slavery as compatible with Christianity,

democracy, and the American way. Moreover, during the same period, northern states viewed “Black Codes” or racial segregation as compatible with the American Dream. Hochschild and Scovronick see racial domination as “the most glaring flaw in the ideology of the American dream” (p. 28). Was racial domination just a flaw or the core of the dream? As Reginald Horsman demonstrated in *Race and Manifest Destiny* (1981), the belief in White American superiority was firmly ensconced in the nation’s ideology by 1850. White Americans in general believed that people of color were incapable of sharing in democratic government and that Whites could achieve unprecedented prosperity and power by dominating people of color. Hence, for slaveholders, segregationists, and racialists in general, racial domination was not a flaw in the dream, it was the dream itself. Our past is characterized by different and contradictory dreams, and whatever common ground we stand on today is the consequence of intense conflict and at times unanticipated coalitions, not the triumph of long-standing shared commitments and cultural unity. Thus, despite protest to the contrary, there is not only a place in the national narrative for the distinctive character of ethnic history, even the emergence of some common ground in the present cannot be understood apart from the past racial and ethnic conflicts that undergird its development. Indeed, contemporary consensus around such matters as the right to vote, to attend school without racial discrimination, or to ride a bus without a line of racial demarcation is the result of intense racial conflict as recent as four decades ago.

Consequently, schools and teachers must also consider the social health of schoolchildren from racial and ethnic minority groups who have traveled different passageways to the present. The teaching of history and culture has the same meaning and implications for minority as for majority students. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., in *The Disuniting of America* (1994, pp. 46, 137), while arguing against the teaching of ethnic history, stressed the critical importance of knowing from whence we come and the cultural heritage that defines our mission. “Our values are not whim and happenstance,” said Schlesinger. “History has given them to us.” Further, Schlesinger continued, “They [our national values] are anchored in our national experience, in our national heroes, in our folkways, traditions, and standards.” More important, “History is to the nation rather as memory is to the individual.” As an individual deprived of memory becomes disoriented and lost, not knowing where he has been or where he is going, “so a nation denied a conception of its past will be disabled in dealing with its present and its future.” But what if an ethnic group is deprived of a knowledge of its past; will it not also become disoriented and lost, and disabled in dealing with its present and future? If history has the same meaning for African American, Native American, Asian American, and Latino schoolchildren as for the nation’s Anglo majority, are we not equally obligated to provide for them an accurate and balanced portrayal of where they have been and what their distinctive histories and cultures mean for where they are going? Or are we contending that ethnic minority schoolchildren need little or no understanding of their distinctive heritage and can find their bearing, identity, and dreams through immersion in the dominant groups’ heritage? It is difficult to see how one can have it both ways. If denying a dominant group an understanding of its past leaves it “disoriented and lost,” such deprivation will leave minority groups similarly situated. It is not a question of public schools “maintaining the culture of any particular group,” it is a question of teaching American history and culture in all of its complexity, including the separate and distinctive experiences of social classes and ethnic groups, so that no group or individual “becomes disoriented and lost,” and therefore “disabled in dealing with its present and its future.”

Nothing underscores the need to understand ethnic history and culture more than Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom's *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*. They believe that there is only one way to realize true equality and the American dream: close the racial gap in skills and knowledge starting in the early grades. Hence, their book is focused mainly on understanding the underlying causes of the racial gap in standardized test scores and solutions to the problem. Beginning from the unfounded premise that racial discrimination has been erased in America and that remaining economic and social inequalities result from differences in academic achievement, the Thernstroms contend that racial disparities in test scores are due mainly to the "fact" that African American culture does not value education the way the culture of middle-class Whites does. The foundation of their explanation of differences in academic achievement between Blacks and Whites rests on assumptions about African American culture and the ways in which it enters into and affects achievement motivation and behavior. Early in the analysis it becomes apparent that the Thernstroms would benefit greatly from an understanding of the development of African American culture and the ways that its evolution runs counter to fluctuations in test score patterns.

Put quite simply, patterns of African American academic achievement are subject to sudden changes and fluctuations that cannot be attributed to changes in African American culture. For example, as late as 1998 Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, editors of the *Black-White Test Score Gap*, focused on explaining the decline of racial disparities in standardized test scores. Part three of their book, "How and Why the Gap Has Changed," emphasized the Black-White test score convergence since 1965 and asked the following question: "Why did the Black-White test score gap narrow in the 1970s and 1980s?" From 1971 to 1994, the reading gap between Black and White seventeen-year-olds, as measured by National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), narrowed more than 40 percent and the math gap also narrowed, though less dramatically. In view of these changes, as David Grissmer, Ann Flanagan, and Stephanie Williamson argued, "those who believe that families and schools have gotten worse surely have an obligation to explain rising NAEP scores, particularly for minorities" (p. 223). They, as others in the Jencks and Phillips book, attempted to assess whether structural changes in social class and family characteristics could explain the narrowing of racial disparities on standardized tests. After finding that the test score performance of African Americans increased substantially more than expected, they concluded that improved school performance was sustained by positive changes in the social and cultural environment. We now know that this was merely an assertion as there were no good studies examining the relationship between increases in African American test scores and cultural norms in African American communities. In fact, throughout the first nine decades of the twentieth century, as African American achievement levels increased steadily, virtually no scholars seemed willing to attribute these increases to Black culture norms.

However, when Black-White test score patterns reversed in the 1990s, the Thernstroms, along with a cadre of pundits, scholars, and politicians argued that African American culture was directly responsible for the growing racial gap in test score performance. "Black culture," asserted the Thernstroms, "has much to do with the racial gap in academic achievement" (p. 120). John McWhorter (2001, pp. 24–32; 2000, pp. 124–126, 147), a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, has written that African American underachievement stems directly from "a strong tendency toward anti-intellectualism at all levels of the black community." McWhorter argues that "the actual determining factor" of poor school performance among contemporary African American schoolchildren is "a cult of anti-intellectualism"

that is endemic to all age groups and social classes in the U. S. Black population. Orlando Patterson (2000, p. 206), a Black sociologist at Harvard, argues in a similar vein that the underachievement of African American students cannot be attributed to the long history of segregation and inequality, to genetic differences between the races, or to class differences. "In a nutshell," argues Patterson, "it is culture." Denesh D'Souza (1991, p. 794) writes that Blacks and Whites in this country do not have vastly different goals. They have shared goals, he maintains. But they have vastly different cultures and therefore different cultural capacities for achieving educational and economic success. He calls for "a concerted and direct effort to raise the cultural standards of all groups and particularly that of blacks." If significant change is to occur in African American academic achievement, D'Souza maintains, "[w]e specifically must address the cultural breakdown in the African-American community."

To say the least, scholars have no significant understanding of the relationship between Black culture and the school performance of African American students. As soon as they began to blame test score declines on Black culture, African American test scores began to rise and once again the achievement gap began to converge. According to an analysis of 2002 NAEP reading scores by the Education Trust, results of assessment released in June 2003 reveal that African American and Latino schoolchildren continue to raise their test scores and also narrow the gaps between minority students and White students in the early grades. Reading achievement for African American fourth graders rose in almost every state, their average scale scores increasing in twenty-seven of thirty-one states. More important, the Black-White test score gap in reading (for fourth graders) narrowed in twenty-five of thirty-three states, and in every instance but one, narrowing occurred while scores increased for both Black and White students. This result departs from the pattern of the past three decades when narrowing occurred because African American and Latino students made gains while test scores for Whites remained flat. According to another study, in mathematics (for grades four and eight) African American and Latino students attained higher average NAEP scores than in any of the previous assessment years. At grade four, the score gap between White and Black students decreased between 2000 and 2003 and was smaller in 2003 than in 1990. Such patterns raise the obvious question, if declines in African American test scores are to be blamed on Black culture, to what then do we attribute the increases? Looking over the patterns of African American achievement in the twentieth century, it is plainly clear that except for the decline in test scores during the 1990s, every other decade witnessed a steady increase in African American school performance. Hence, scholars like the Thernstroms who believe that Black culture has much to do with the widening of the test score gap have an obligation to explain the relationship between Black culture and the narrowing of the test score gap. What should be obvious to all is the fact that patterns in cultural changes have virtually no relationship to fluctuations in test score performance.<sup>1</sup>

Historians are never sure what lessons can be drawn from the study of human beliefs and behavior. Except perhaps one: human groups cannot change their culture overnight. For those who insist on a one-to-one correspondence between culture and academic achievement, if African American culture had much to do with the convergence of the racial gap in test scores from 1970 to 1990, it is highly improbable that the same culture changed suddenly in 1990 to account for the widening of the test score gap over the next several years. What is even more absurd is the idea that African American culture would change once again at the dawn of the twenty-first century to account for the convergence of test scores occurring between 2000 and 2004. Until there are serious, empirically based, longitudinal studies of African

American culture and its relationship to academic motivation and achievement, all scholars would do well to refrain from connecting ebbs and flows in test score performance to the origins and persistence of cultural norms in African American communities. Such tendencies result in vague, undocumented, and misguided assertions about African American culture and the causes of changes in patterns of academic achievement. The Thernstroms argue that investigation of the current racial gap in academic achievement does not allow them to “dismiss cultural explanations” (p. 147). In point of fact the opposite is true. Given what little we know about changes in structure and content of African American culture over past decades, cultural explanations are based on scanty evidence at best and racial stereotypes at worse.

A good example of this tendency is the propagation of the “acting White” myth as an explanation of African American underachievement. The idea that Black students accuse their high achieving peers with being race defectors (allegedly the high achievers are attacked for “acting White”) was first proposed in the mid-1980s by the late John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham. Soon this became a widely popular theory for explaining the academic underachievement of African American students and the Black-White test score gap. Recently, the main tenets of the “acting White” thesis have been examined empirically. Such researchers find little evidence of either an oppositional culture or a “burden of acting White” among African American adolescents. Indeed, empirical analyses report little difference between African American adolescents in the degree to which they value academic achievement. For example, an empirical study by Karolyn Tyson, William Darity, Jr., and Domini Castellino found no evidence of the “acting White” idea among African American elementary students in North Carolina. Their findings suggest that the notion of “acting White” is not an attitude widely held in Black communities. They found limited evidence of racialized peer pressure against academic achievement at the high school level, but in the one context where African American students were grossly underrepresented in the demanding courses (e.g., AP and Honors courses). “For example,” the authors write, “in a school where 40% to 60% of students are black but only one or two make their way into AP or Honors courses, those one or two are more likely to be the object of the charge that they are ‘acting white.’” Significantly, in such a school the notion of the burden of “acting White” was most pervasive among the teachers and administrators, not among Black students. Although the notion of “acting White” has become a matter of self-evident truth among those inclined to blame African American culture for the racial gap in test scores, serious empirical studies are finding that contrary to popular belief, most African American students do not carry a cultural bias against high academic achievement. Moreover, where such attitudes do exist, they are more likely to be constructed in schools than learned in African American communities.<sup>2</sup>

In *City Schools and the American Dream: Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education*, Pedro Noguera gives a more complex reading of the causes of minority school failure and the difficult challenge of achieving the American Dream in view of the external and internal structural constraints that limit individual and family agency. In contrast to those who place the blame for school failure on African American and Latino cultures, Noguera has a different view of the root causes of racial and ethnic gaps in achievement: “The extreme disparities in wealth that pervade U.S. society are largely responsible for the plight of young people and the state of education in urban areas” (p. 15). To the extent that disparities in wealth affect education, the growing wealth gap could make it more difficult for schools to facilitate achievement of the American dream. Recent reports on the wealth gap suggest that the achievement gap will

persist. The terrible irony is that the economic underpinnings of the American Dream are slipping away from the reaches of large populations of color just as the ideology of the American Dream is being offered as the peace pipe of national unity. A recent study by the Pew Hispanic Research Center (Kochhar 2004) documents that Latino and Black households have less than ten cents for every dollar in wealth owned by White households. More important, the situation has worsened over the past few years. Between 1999 and 2001, the net worth of Latino and Black households fell by 27% each. During the same period, the net worth of White households increased by 2%. Consequently, the median net worth of White households in 2002 was \$88,651; the median wealth of Latino households at the same time was \$7,932 and the net worth of Black households was only \$5,988, or approximately 7% of the median wealth of White households. Net worth is not only the most crucial indicator of economic well being, it also provides access to superior education and health, and is highly correlated with social and political influence. The wealth of African American and Latino households is only a small fraction of the wealth of White households, the former representing the American nightmare and the latter the American Dream. Thus the key indicator of overall well-being marks a wide gulf between the American Dream and the actual experiences of the nation's two largest minority populations, Latinos and African Americans.

Noguera examines both external constraints (e.g., the wealth gap) and internal constraints on academic achievement. Among several internal constraints, he cites inadequate facilities and a shortage of instructional materials such as computers and textbooks as barriers to inner-city students' achievement. Significantly, the Thernstroms pay little or no attention to such matters. Convinced that urban schools are incompetent, they see no reason to invest in such reforms as more equal funding, better school facilities, a more highly qualified and stable teaching force, and a reduction in class size. They propose solutions that require little economic investment in schools serving minority children. As the Thernstroms stated: "It does not cost more to raise academic and behavioral standards, and money, per se, is no panacea. Additional funding poured into the existing system will not solve the problem of underachieving black and Hispanic students" (p. 6). Given the inadequate and even immoral plight of school buildings and facilities in many of the nation's urban school systems, the Thernstroms' position is irresponsible and inconsistent with documented analyses of the pressing need to rebuild the infrastructure of American schools, particularly those in inner-city areas.

Rebuilding the physical infrastructure of American schools is critical for sustaining a high-quality learning environment for all students. In short, millions of students are in need of decent facilities, especially in urban areas. Decent school structures are generally defined as those that are structurally safe, contain fire safety measures, safe water supply, sufficient sanitary toilet and plumbing facilities, adequate light, and are free from asbestos. Despite studies and media reports on the inadequacy of American school facilities since 1965, too many public schools are in substandard condition and need major repairs due to leaking roofs, asbestos dust and fibers, plumbing problems, inadequate heating and lighting systems, poor ventilation, or other system failures. This means, among other necessary reforms, constructing schools, equipping classrooms to connect to the Internet, and increasing the physical capacity for distance education. Too many U.S. schools, many built over fifty years ago, are increasingly run-down, overcrowded and technologically ill equipped. According to reports by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) published in 1995, one-third of U.S. schools needed major repair or outright repair or replacement; 60% needed work on major building structures such as a sagging roof, or a

cracked foundation; and 46% lacked even the basic electrical wiring to support computers, modems, and modern communications technology. Projected record increases in student enrollments over the next ten years, 1995–2005, necessitated 6,000 new schools. In 1995, the GAO estimated that the federal government would need to invest \$112 billion to provide decent school facilities for all children. In response to such concerns, President Clinton introduced new school construction legislation that authorized \$5 billion of federal funds to stimulate over \$20 billion in school construction, as a starting point. However, Congress did not approve the proposed legislation. Meanwhile, conditions have deteriorated further over the past decade, especially in inner-city areas. After considerable involvement with and study of inner-city school systems, Noguera reaches a disturbing yet responsible conclusion: “Ultimately, the lack of a concerted and sustained effort to failing urban public schools can be explained only by understanding that America simply does not care that large numbers of children from inner-city schools and neighborhoods are not properly educated” (p. 14). Throughout American history professional educators and their political allies have looked to public schools to create a homogeneous people while maintaining schools that differed sharply along race, ethnic, and class lines. This contradiction makes one wonder as to whether the so-called pursuit of national unity is primarily a search for an ideology to build a fragile bridge across irreconcilable contradictions or a genuine search for a shared commitment to justice and common political principles.<sup>3</sup>

David Tyack, in *Seeking Common Ground* raises a fundamental question: “Has public education failed the nation? Or, perhaps, has the nation failed public education” (p. 182). In answering his own question he reached the following conclusion. “The political and moral purposes that gave resonance to public education in earlier times have become muted, and constituencies that once supported common schools have become splintered and confused about where to invest their educational loyalties” (p. 182). Consequently, there is even a greater irony in the current demands for schools to shoulder the burden of creating cultural unity and common polity in a society that is becoming increasingly diverse. It is certainly reasonable and understandable that any nation would seek common ground among its citizens (i.e., a shared sense of political principles and national identity). Nonetheless, cultural unity and common polity are not processes that can be arbitrarily imposed on the past or suddenly created through patriotic pedagogy. “When you mix together common schools, a diverse society, and an open political system, you can expect disagreement and conflict,” Tyack concludes (p. 183). This book should be read last as it compels us to face our past squarely and to raise many questions regarding our persistent quest for a kind of civic education that will mold the nation into a common polity.

The task of forging a cultural unity and common polity through public education is fraught with dangers. Tyack reminds us of America’s long-standing effort “to create civic cohesion through education in a socially diverse and contentious democracy” (p. 3). In so doing we appreciate the extent to which many contemporary prescriptions sound like proposals from the Colonial era. Benjamin Rush’s concept of civic education for national unity foreshadowed contemporary anxieties over “Balkanization” and the need for national unity. Rush argued that the best way to render the mass of people more homogeneous was to create schools that inculcated republican principles and attributes of character. Rush’s view is not fundamentally different from Hochschild and Scovronick’s prescription that “public schools have to focus most on what we have in common” in order to create cultural unity and a common national identity. Tyack enables us to see the difficulty of this goal in a system of public education that reflects the fundamental divisions in the larger society. Describ-



ing schools in the early national period, Tyack concludes: “From the Revolution to Jefferson’s death in 1826, most American schools remained heterogeneous rather than uniform and systematic, were private rather than public, and tended to perpetuate differences of social class, sect, and region rather than inculcating a universal republicanism” (p. 19). This could have been a description of contemporary public schooling. Even as schools became public rather than private, they continued to reflect differences in social class, ethnicity, and gender. Hochschild and Scovronick contend that public schools must develop shared commitments as well as appreciation for differences among children because children are unlikely to learn it anywhere else in American society. On the contrary, if America is ever to achieve common ground, it must be built day by day in the work place, unions, political organizations, military, courts, and other dominant institutions in society. Public schools, however much they shape society, are fundamentally subordinate to the dominant economic, political, social, and military institutions, and thus mirror more than create social change. Put another way, America has to save its schools; the schools cannot save America.

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## NOTES

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