Closing the Opportunity Gap

WHAT AMERICA MUST DO TO GIVE EVERY CHILD AN EVEN CHANCE

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Why Children from Lower Socioeconomic Classes, on Average, Have Lower Academic Achievement Than Middle-Class Children

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To much of the public, it seems self-evident that public schools must be "failing" if they produce large gaps in academic achievement between middle-class White and low-income minority youth. Why, many observers reasonably ask, should the color of a child's skin or how much money his or her family earns affect whether he or she can absorb the instruction of an effective teacher? Many low-income children have been successful in school despite their family hardships. If these children can succeed, all should be able to do so.

This commonsense attitude suffers from a lack of sophistication about the academic and behavioral differences that are typically produced by social and economic differences. Of course, low-income or minority status do not themselves produce low achievement, but the concrete expressions of these characteristics create impediments to learning that result in average differences in achievement by social class. Some low-income children will always achieve at higher levels than typical middle-class children, and some middle-class children will always achieve at lower levels than typical low-income children. Every human characteristic has a wide distribution. Notwithstanding these distributions, every human characteristic also has a central tendency, or average. It will also always be the case that, on average, lower-class children will achieve at lower levels than children from higher social classes. This is true in every industrialized country. On international tests, every country has an achievement gap comparable to that in the United States.¹
This chapter describes how social class characteristics operate to produce differences in achievement. It shows why when lower social class characteristics are highly concentrated in particular neighborhoods, achievement is depressed even further. It notes that better schools can elicit higher achievement from disadvantaged children than worse schools, but no matter how good school quality may be, the achievement gap will remain. The chapter recounts the accusation that mere discussion by educators of the relationship between social class and achievement amounts to “making excuses,” and responds that failure to acknowledge problems is a certain way to perpetuate them. And the chapter describes some practical programs—such as high-quality early childhood care and education, health clinics in schools, high-quality after-school and summer programs, and policies to promote residential integration by race and class—that could help narrow the achievement gap. Each of these is politically difficult; none is out of reach.

**SOCIOECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE DEPRESSES ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

If two groups of children attend equally high-quality schools, the group with greater socioeconomic disadvantage will inevitably have lower average academic achievement than the more fortunate group. Many social and economic manifestations of class have important implications for learning.

First, health matters. Children who can’t see well can’t read as well as those who can, and lower-class children, on average, have poorer vision than middle-class children. Lower-income children have a higher incidence of lead poisoning, poorer nutrition, and higher rates of iron-deficiency anemia, which result in impaired cognitive ability. They have greater exposure to environmental toxins, air pollution, and smoke, and therefore greater incidence of asthma. Lower-class children have less adequate pediatric care, resulting in more frequent absences from school.

The lack of affordable housing for low-income families is another social class characteristic that has a demonstrable effect on average achievement. Children whose families have difficulty finding adequate housing move frequently, and student mobility is an important cause of low achievement. Teachers cannot work as effectively with children who are in their classrooms for a short time as with those who stay longer. Moreover, the learning of all children attending schools in low-income communities is undermined if their classrooms have high turnover rates because teachers must repeat content for the benefit of newcomers and classes are reconstituted when the influx or departure of students makes classes too large or too small. In such unstable circumstances, even the most skilled
teachers cannot ascertain the individual strengths and weaknesses of their students and adapt instruction accordingly.

Poor children, on average, come from families where parents have less education than parents in middle-class families. In consequence, poor children are not read to aloud or exposed to complex language and large vocabularies as often as middle-class children. Their parents have low-wage jobs and are more frequently laid off, causing family stress and more-arbitrary discipline, and when parents are out of work, adolescents are more likely to be delinquent, use drugs, lose faith in the future, and suffer from depression. As children play and walk to school, they face neighborhoods in which crime and drugs are visible, and gainfully employed adults are scarce. Impoverished children more often live in single-parent families and receive less adult attention than their more fortunate counterparts.

Parents of different social classes tend to have different styles of childrearing. They utilize different modes of discipline and communicate their expectations differently. In reading a story to young children, more educated parents are more likely to ask children what they think will happen next or what they would have done in a situation like that in the story. Less educated parents are more likely to ask children to recall what just happened. These differences are not found universally, but they are common enough to influence the average experiences of children from different social classes. Childrearing styles arise from, among other factors, the disparate life experiences of people in the middle and lower classes. Upper-middle-class parents tend to hold jobs that involve collaboration with colleagues, are expected to solve problems, and strive to contribute to the success of the enterprise. They are more likely to instruct their children indirectly, asking their children to understand the reason behind an instruction. Lower-class parents, whose jobs often require them to perform routine tasks, follow instructions, and never question authority, are more likely to instruct their children in a more direct fashion, issuing orders without extensive explanation. Moreover, reading ability depends not only on learning the mechanics but also on having a broad range of experiences in which to situate written material. Children raised in lower-class families whose experiences are narrower are at a disadvantage. Travel, visits to museums and zoos, music or dance lessons, and participation in organized sports all enrich the context for reading, as well as nurturing ambition, cultural awareness, and self-confidence. On average, children who are raised by college-educated parents have more inquisitive attitudes toward the material presented by their teachers than do children who are raised by working-class parents. As children move into higher grades, where critical thinking becomes more important than mere retention of facts or formulas, this difference becomes more serious.
Each of these well-documented social class differences has a palpable though small effect on academic achievement, but the cumulative effect of these disadvantages explains much of the achievement gap.

**CONCENTRATING DISADVANTAGE**

The negative effects of lower social class status are exacerbated when large numbers of disadvantaged students are concentrated in particular schools. Remediation becomes the norm, and teachers have little time to challenge the exceptional students who can overcome the personal, family, and community hardships that typically interfere with learning.

Nationwide, the isolation of low-income Black and Latino students has been increasing. Integrating these students into schools where more privileged students predominate is an essential prerequisite for narrowing achievement gaps and enhancing the opportunities of low-income Black and Latino students. Racial and socioeconomic integration of schools is a necessary complement to efforts to improve these students' early childhood experiences, health, housing, economic security, and informal learning opportunities. Poorly performing segregated schools cannot be "turned around" if their isolation is not addressed. In high-poverty environments, the problems students bring to school are so overwhelming that policy should never be premised on the assumption that they could be overcome by even the most skilled and dedicated faculty. While schools can make a difference in the lives of these children, they cannot erase the damage done by concentrated poverty.

An investigation of reform in Chicago elementary schools attempted to distinguish the characteristics of schools whose students made dramatic improvements from those of schools whose students stagnated. Schools that had well-developed and aligned curriculum, featured collaboration between teachers and principals, and made a concerted effort to involve parents and the community made substantially greater progress than schools without these characteristics. But the investigators, to their surprise, discovered that well-designed reform programs made little or no difference in schools serving neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, where nearly all students were residentially mobile, African American, and had low-income parents with relatively little formal education and a high likelihood of unemployment. These communities had high crime rates and inadequate community supports, such as health care and social service providers, and few adults exemplified the benefits of educational attainment. In communities of concentrated disadvantage, addressing these contextual factors was essential before school reform could take root. The investigators concluded, "Our findings about
schooling in truly disadvantaged communities offer a sobering antidote to a heady political rhetoric arguing that all schools can be improved.17

Statistical and qualitative studies document the positive effects of school integration by socioeconomic status and race.18 Opportunity gaps that segregation produces are indicated by a Texas study of fourth to seventh graders. A team of prominent economists found that, after controlling for a large number of background characteristics, Black student achievement in mathematics declined as the proportion of Black students in a school increased. They concluded that reducing this proportion would improve Black students’ achievement, would have no significant harmful effects on White students, and could reduce the Black-White achievement gap by about 10 percent.19 A literature review of many studies concerning the end of court-ordered desegregation after the 1970s concluded that the “the circumstantial case linking school segregation to the test score gap is compelling.”20 The test-score benefits found in most studies of the deconcentration of poverty and racial isolation are not large, however; rather, the most substantial gains came in rates of graduation, employment, financial self-sufficiency, and avoidance of teen childbearing and delinquency.21 Econometric studies have compared outcomes that could be attributed to court-ordered school integration programs of the 1960s and 1970s relative to outcomes in the absence of integration orders. Court-ordered desegregation was associated with declining Black student dropout rates, without corresponding increases in White rates.22 In districts subject to integration orders, Black youths’ rate of homicide arrests was cut in half and their rate of homicide victimization also fell by a quarter.23

In urban neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, a high proportion of families is made up of female-headed households, lives below the federal poverty line, and receives benefits from the state; many are unemployed, and most are Black or Hispanic. A comparison of low-income Black children living in different types of neighborhoods reveals that those who live in areas of concentrated poverty are three times as likely to drop out of high school as otherwise similar students who live in low-poverty neighborhoods, and half again as likely to drop out as those in moderate-poverty neighborhoods. Living in poorer neighborhoods is a strong predictor of whether teenagers become pregnant and drop out of high school.24 The risk of these adverse outcomes jumped when fewer than one in twenty employed adults in the neighborhood held professional or managerial jobs.25 Children raised in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty have, on average, lower verbal ability than socioeconomically similar children raised elsewhere.26

Although almost all desegregation efforts since the 1960s have attempted to change student placement policies at the school level through busing, school choice, magnet schools, or modest shifts in attendance zones, two policy initiatives, 35...
years apart, attempted to integrate neighborhoods, permitting the measurement of residential integration on student outcomes. Beginning in the late 1970s, under a court order to remedy purposeful racial segregation of public housing, Chicago officials issued Section 8 vouchers to African Americans living in public housing. The vouchers enabled the public housing residents to rent apartments in predominantly White suburbs. Called the Gautreaux program (named for the plaintiff in the original lawsuit), it was studied as a quasi-experiment because families were randomly assigned within the program: the next eligible family on the waiting list was offered the first private apartment that became available, whether it was located in a predominantly White suburb or in a segregated urban neighborhood. Adolescent children who moved to the suburbs fared better than those who stayed in the city, with lower high school dropout rates and greater likelihood of college attendance, especially at four-year colleges.27

Officials in Montgomery County, Maryland, recently sponsored a sophisticated experiment to test the effects of integration. The county purchased apartments in suburban Washington, DC, and designated them for families eligible for public housing. Families were randomly assigned to units in more- and less-affluent neighborhoods, permitting a scholar to follow the academic achievement of these families' children on standardized math and reading tests. Nearly three-quarters of the children were African American. Those who attended neighborhood schools in which fewer than 20 percent of the students came from low-income families significantly outperformed similar children who attended schools with greater proportions of low-income students. As the share of children from low-income families increased, the advantage diminished, disappearing when 35 percent or more of students came from low-income families. The benefits of integration alone were greater than the benefits of attending a school that was not integrated but that received substantial additional resources to compensate for children's poverty.28

Ethnographic studies of students who have participated in racial integration programs support the expectation that these students will benefit from working together and be better prepared for civic engagement. For example, retrospective interviews with adults who graduated from integrated high schools in 1980 found that Black students who had participated in court-ordered desegregation plans felt more comfortable and confident about their ability to compete in a predominantly White economy.29

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT, TOO

The nexus between concentrated socioeconomic disadvantage and poor educational outcomes does not imply that schools make no difference, or that school
improvement is fruitless in the absence of broader social and economic reforms. No matter how serious their problems, disadvantaged students do better in high-quality schools. And in any demographic group, there is a range of ability among individuals; some disadvantaged students outperform typical middle-class students, and some middle-class students fall behind typical disadvantaged students. The achievement gap is a difference in the average achievement of students from disadvantaged and middle-class families.

Because socioeconomic disadvantage is closely correlated with race, the legacy of racial inequality takes its toll as well. In some districts and schools, students are effectively tracked by race, denied the most qualified teachers and the most up-to-date facilities, curriculum, and materials. Failure is expected and accepted. Some educators use students' socioeconomic disadvantage as an excuse for failing to teach well under adverse conditions, whereas others work hard to develop disadvantaged students' talents. But even the most qualified and dedicated teachers cannot marshal the compensatory resources and efforts required when large numbers of disadvantaged students are concentrated in classrooms.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), administered to a national sample of students by the federal government, is generally considered the most reliable measure of US students' achievement. Since 1990, the achievement gap between minority and White students has barely changed, feeding accusations that educators ignore the needs of minority youth. Yet the average math scores of Black fourth graders in 2009 were higher than those of White fourth graders in 1990. If White achievement had been stagnant, the gap would have been closed. Black eighth graders also made substantial gains in math. The gap stagnated only because White students' scores also rose.30 Reading scores for minority students improved, though not nearly as much as their mathematics scores. (Math achievement is more generally results from classroom instruction, while reading ability more heavily reflects students' home environments.) The dramatic gains in math suggest that efforts to improve instruction may have made a measurable difference for both minority and White students. They also make implausible the claim that most teachers of disadvantaged students have low expectations for these children's performance.

The policy conclusion to be drawn from these observations is that closing or substantially narrowing achievement gaps requires combining school improvement with reforms that narrow the vast socioeconomic inequalities in the United States. Without such a combination, demands such as those made by the No Child Left Behind Act that schools eliminate achievement gaps will not only remain unfulfilled but also cause us to condemn our schools and teachers unfairly.
Overcoming the Obstacles We Create for Children

DISTORTING DISADVANTAGE

Most educators understand that socioeconomic disadvantage lowers average academic achievement. Some policy makers and educators who call themselves "school reformers" resist this logic and throw up a variety of defenses. Some illogically conclude that calling attention to how socioeconomic disadvantage affects achievement is no different from charging that disadvantaged children have a genetic disability, that poor and minority children can't learn. They contend that highlighting the socioeconomic causes of low achievement "blames the victim" and legitimizes racism. Others regard an analysis of the socioeconomic causes of lower achievement dangerous because it "makes excuses" for poor instruction or because demands for social and economic reform "let schools off the hook." Still others say it's simply too difficult to address nonschool problems such as inadequate incomes, health, or housing. The way some school reformers see it, those who call attention to socioeconomic causes want to wait until utopian economic change (or "socialism") becomes a reality before we begin to improve schools.

In reality, many practical reforms could demonstrably improve disadvantaged children's readiness to learn. By insisting that any discussion of social and economic reform is tantamount to postponing school improvement until our economic system is totally transformed, these school reformers make it impossible to weigh the relative effectiveness of practical socioeconomic versus instructional improvements for raising the achievement of disadvantaged children.

The argument of these self-described reformers is at its most incoherent when they themselves insist on the necessity of interventions that might bring disadvantaged children to school more ready to learn, yet simultaneously advocate tough school and teacher accountability systems that take no account of whether those interventions have been attempted. In a 2011 interview, for example, the US secretary of education Arne Duncan recounted his earlier efforts as superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools:

If children can't see the blackboard, they're going to have a hard time learning so we have to get them eyeglasses. We used to get literally tens of thousands of kids eyeglasses every year. If children aren't fed and are hungry, they're going to have a hard time concentrating, so we fed tens of thousands of kids three meals a day. We had a couple of thousand kids we were particularly worried about so very quietly we would send them home Friday afternoons with a backpack full of food because we worried about them not eating over the weekend.

Yet Duncan proposed a "blueprint" for re-authorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that would hold schools accountable for getting all children "college
and career ready" by 2020, whether they can see the blackboard, come to school hungry every day, or eat over the weekend. He designed and implemented the competitive grant program Race to the Top in which states earned points for expanding the charter school sector, developing data systems to tie teacher performance to student test scores, and making other educational changes. But no points were awarded for providing eyeglasses or food, or for implementing any of the multitude of practical programs that might actually improve disadvantaged youths’ school readiness and thus their chances of college or career success.36

SEEING THROUGH “NO EXCUSES”

The commonplace “no excuses” attack on discussion of the socioeconomic causes of low achievement implies that if educators were to realize that their efforts alone are insufficient to raise student achievement, they would simply give up. Those who make this argument implicitly presume that policymakers like themselves, with Olympian perspectives, can trick teachers into performing at a higher level by making them believe that unrealistically high levels of success are within reach.

This suppression of awareness of how socioeconomic disadvantage lowers student achievement is morally, politically, and intellectually bankrupt. Our first obligation should be to analyze social problems accurately; only then can we design effective solutions. Presenting a deliberately flawed version of reality because of fear that the truth will lead to reduced effort is corrupt and self-defeating. Teachers see for themselves how poor health or family economic stress impede students’ learning. Too many educators today have been intimidated and refrain from acknowledging these realities aloud and, in groupthink obedience, repeat the mantra that “all children can learn.” But nobody is fooled. Conscientious teachers know that some children’s learning is impeded by poor health, poorly educated parents and caregivers, and insecure homes. Suppressing these truths leads only to cynicism and disillusionment. Anecdotal evidence now abounds that too many talented teachers are abandoning the profession, willing to shoulder responsibility for their own instructional competence but not for failures that are beyond their control.

Mythology also prevents educators from properly diagnosing educational failure where it exists. If we expect all disadvantaged students to succeed at levels typical of affluent students, then even the best inner-city teachers look like failures. If we pretend that achievement gaps are entirely within teachers’ control, how can we distinguish better from worse classroom practices?

Promoters of the notion that schools can overcome social and economic causes of low achievement assert that claims to the contrary let schools “off the hook.” But this myth lets public officials and corporate leaders “off the hook,” absolving
them from responsibility for narrowing the inequalities that pervade American society. Instead, they should be held accountable for health-care gaps, racial segregation, inadequate housing, and income inequality and insecurity.

Some critics urge that educators' responsibility, authority, and power extends only to classroom practices, so remedying socioeconomic and racial injustice is not their business. According to this reasoning, we should leave the challenge of worrying about inequality to health, housing, and labor experts. Yet we are all citizens in this democracy, and educators have special insight into the damage that deprivation does to children's potential. If educators who face this unfortunate state of affairs daily don't speak up about it, who will? Educators and their professional organizations should publicly insist that social and economic reforms are needed to create an environment in which the most effective teaching can take place. Instead, however, critical voices have been silenced, told they should stick to their knitting, fearing an accusation that denouncing inequality is tantamount to "making excuses."

WHAT WE CAN DO

Modest social and economic reforms that are well within our political reach could have palpable effects on student achievement. For example, we could ensure good pediatric, optometric, and dental care for all students in school-based clinics. We could expand existing housing subsidy programs to reduce low-income families' involuntary mobility. We could provide higher-quality early childhood care so that children are not parked before televisions while their parents are at work. We could increase the earned income tax credit, the minimum wage, and collective bargaining rights so that families of low-wage workers are less financially and emotionally stressed. We could promote the construction of mixed-income housing developments in the suburbs and gentrifying cities to give more low-income students the benefits of attending integrated neighborhood schools. We could fund after-school programs so that inner-city children spend less time in dangerous environments and, instead, develop their cultural, artistic, organizational, and athletic potential.

None of these reforms is utopian. All would send more children to school ready to learn. A broad group of experts and advocates, including both Democrats and Republicans, social scientists and religious leaders, has banded together in a campaign called the "Broader, Bolder Approach to Education" to advocate many of these programs in a package of socioeconomic as well as school interventions. Educators who are unafraid to advocate a balanced set of policies could call the hand of politicians and business leaders who claim that full-service school clinics and full funding of housing voucher programs are too expensive, but at the same time demand school reform so they can posture as the protectors of minority children.
Beyond policies that narrow inequality among families, there is also much that can be done to deconcentrate disadvantage in schools and communities. Massachusetts operates a voluntary integration plan in which predominantly White Boston suburbs receive state subsidies to fill excess school capacity with students voluntarily bused from inner-city neighborhoods; most are African American or Hispanic, and most come from low-income families. Interviews with graduates of the program found that most were prepared to succeed: they had higher rates of college enrollment, better jobs, and higher incomes in adulthood than they could have expected by staying in racially isolated neighborhood schools. Unfortunately, suburban school districts generally offer many fewer places than are needed to accommodate the urban students who apply.

Some school districts have implemented voluntary racial integration programs, usually involving parental choice combined with some race-conscious limitations. However, the US Supreme Court’s 2007 decision in Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District (551 U.S. 701) found that such plans in Louisville and Seattle included an unconstitutional use of race, so the future of these voluntary integration plans is unsettled. Alternatively, some districts are attempting to address concentrated poverty, which implicitly addresses racial segregation. These policies identify students for school assignment by their family incomes or the socioeconomic characteristics of their neighborhoods. For several years, a mandatory busing program in Wake County, North Carolina, which includes Raleigh and Durham, was promoted as the nation's best example of successful socioeconomic integration. In 2010, however, voters effectively repealed the program, returning low-income students to more economically homogenous and racially isolated schools in their home neighborhoods. Subsequently, voters again reversed themselves and replaced the school board’s anti-integration majority; at the time of this writing, it remains to be seen what the new pupil assignment policy will be.

The harmful educational effects of concentrated poverty are likely to continue unabated without explicit policies to integrate schools both racially and socioeconomicly. While school improvement can partially mitigate the effects of poverty and should be pursued in earnest, a parallel effort focused on both school and neighborhood integration is also necessary. Busing is neither politically feasible nor practical, since the most severely disadvantaged children live far from White, middle-class communities. Effective school integration policy requires increasing the residential proximity of racially and socioeconomicly diverse families. The limited exposure today of low-income Black and Hispanic children to middle-class White children is not solely the result of the differential in assets between the White middle-class and low-income minority families. Despite open housing laws, racial discrimination by realtors and mortgage lenders persists. Some suburbs maintain exclusionary zoning rules that require large houses and lots or prohibit development
of multifamily structures. Repealing such zoning ordinances would open up these exclusive islands of privilege to low-income families. Federal and state governments could create incentives for metropolitan areas to adopt inclusionary zoning rules that require developers to include affordable units in new private housing projects. This policy must be regional because when individual jurisdictions, especially cities, adopt such ordinances separately, they can simply prompt a shift in development to parts of their metropolitan areas where housing can be built without restrictions regarding affordability. Another positive approach should be expansion of the Section 8 program, which provides vouchers to low-income families that make up the difference between one-third of family income and market rents. The program is currently underfunded, and landlords are not required to participate, making a mockery of the Fair Housing Act’s antidiscrimination provisions.

RETICENCE ABOUT RACE

It is puzzling that some critics regard as implicitly racist explanations of why disadvantaged students (who are disproportionately Black) typically achieve at lower levels. Yet, socioeconomic explanations do not blame children and their parents for their lower scores. Instead, they support policies that enhance low-income students’ capacity to learn. For example, by reducing the epidemic incidence of asthma in inner-city minority communities—such as, by enforcing prohibitions on the use of high-sulfur heating oil and requiring urban buses to substitute natural gas for diesel fuel—and by providing treatment for its symptoms in school-based clinics, public-health policy can ensure that children suffering from or susceptible to asthma are more likely to attend school regularly and to be more rested when in attendance. Denying the impact of poor health on learning leads critics to blame teachers for circumstances completely beyond their control.

That the conditions responsible for disadvantage disproportionately afflict Black children reflects the history of racial inequality in the United States. Calling attention to these conditions is not racist. But ignoring them and insisting that they have no effect if teaching is competent may well be.

Some self-styled school reformers characterize analyses of social and economic obstacles to learning as being no different from claims that the “culture” of disadvantaged children explains their low achievement. Looking specifically at Black and White students in the United States, there is, indeed, an apparent racial gap in test scores even when poor students are compared with one another or middle-class students are compared with one another. But these deceptively large gaps stem not mostly from culture but from overly broad definitions of poor and middle-class
status. Typically, because analysts employ a single cutoff (most often, eligibility for free or subsidized lunches), low-income White students are compared with Blacks who are much poorer, while middle-class Black students are compared with Whites who are much more affluent. Besides current-year income, many other socioeconomic characteristics, with different distributions by race, contribute to social class differences, but are not included in commonplace analyses. Black families have, on average, lower net worth than White families of similar income levels. A typical low-income Black family resides in a neighborhood where average incomes are much lower than average incomes in a neighborhood where a typical low-income White family resides. Low-income Hispanics are more isolated than low-income Whites, but not as isolated as low-income Blacks.45 If we restricted comparisons to students who were socioeconomically similar on more sophisticated measures of social class, much of the residual racial test-score gap would disappear.46

But a gap would probably remain. Many responsible advocates for disadvantaged children have sought to offer assistance, advice, and programs designed to improve the household and neighborhood conditions for low-income Black children. These interventions sometimes focus on educational resources and practices within the home, as well as on other childrearing practices, and sometimes focus as well on raising the status of academic success and reducing the influence of gang role models.47 While these factors likely constitute only a small contribution to achievement gaps, they should be discussed openly among policy makers and others seeking to improve children's readiness to learn. When a disadvantaged population is isolated in high-poverty, high-crime areas with few employment opportunities and little or no interaction with those living and working outside, it is inevitable that characteristics will develop that present obstacles to success in the mainstream society and economy. Oppositional behaviors and subcultural dialects, for example, can be obstacles to entry into middle-class occupations.48 The solution should not be a defensive refusal to acknowledge these problems, but reforms that break down the barriers of segregation so all Black children have full opportunities to develop the social and cultural capital necessary for success.

DANCING AROUND THE ISSUE

What about claims that some schools with disadvantaged students have higher achievement, allegedly proving that schools alone can close achievement gaps? Certainly, some schools are superior and should be imitated. But no schools serving disadvantaged students have demonstrated consistent and sustained improvement that closes—not just narrows—achievement gaps. Claims to the contrary
are often fraudulent, sometimes based on schools where parents are unusually well educated, whose admissions policies filter out learning-disabled students or those whose family supports are weaker, or where students, although eligible for subsidized lunches, come from stable working-class rather than poor communities.49

Some claims are based on schools that concentrate on teaching to the tests rather than on critical thinking, social studies, the arts, science, physical education, and citizenship skills. Increasingly, these claims are based on high proportions of students scoring above state proficiency standards that are themselves defined at a low level. Such tactics reduce apparent achievement gaps without addressing real inequalities. However, responsible analysts define closing the achievement gap as achieving similar score distributions and average scale scores among subgroups. Even No Child Left Behind proclaims the widely ignored goal of proficiency at “challenging” levels for each subgroup.

Frequently, claims that some schools achieve spectacular success with disadvantaged Black students are based on accounts of charter schools. These claims are usually not well founded, based only on minimally “proficient” levels on standardized tests. They are also flawed because charter schools are typically selective in ways that make comparisons with regular schools serving disadvantaged children inappropriate.50 Although some charter schools enroll children with disabilities, the disabilities are not as severe as those seen in neighborhood schools. While admission to overenrolled charter schools is usually based on a lottery, the pool comprises only children whose parents are sufficiently motivated to apply, frequently because neighborhood school teachers who spot children’s unusual potential urge these parents to do so. Typically, “high-performing” charter schools do not hesitate to expel or push out students who do not perform to the schools’ behavioral or academic standards.51 It would be surprising if such schools did not have higher average test scores than regular public schools that serve entire neighborhood populations indiscriminately.

BEYOND EITHER/OR

No educator or policy maker should be forced to choose between advocating for better schools or speaking out for greater social and economic equality. Both are essential. Each depends on the other. Educators cannot be effective if they make excuses for poor student performance. But they will have little chance for success unless they also join with advocates of social and economic reform to improve the conditions from which children come to school.