

# Whose Problem Is Poverty?

Richard Rothstein

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Richard Rothstein, "Whose Problem Is Poverty?" *Educational Leadership*, v. 65, no. 7, April 2008, pp. 8-13. Reprinted by permission of the author.

## FOCUS QUESTION

What effect does poverty have on school achievement?

### IN ASC

Standards 1, 9, and 10

### KEY TERM

- National Assessment of Educational Progress

In my work, I've repeatedly stressed this logical claim: If you send two groups of students to equally high-quality schools, the group with greater socioeconomic disadvantage will necessarily have lower *average* achievement than the more fortunate group.<sup>1</sup>

Why is this so? Because low-income children often have no health insurance and therefore no routine preventive medical and dental care, leading to more school absences as a result of illness. Children in low-income families are more prone to asthma, resulting in more sleeplessness, irritability, and lack of exercise. They experience lower birth weight as well as more lead poisoning and iron-deficiency anemia, each of which leads to diminished cognitive ability and more behavior problems. Their families frequently fall behind in rent and move, so children switch schools more often, losing continuity of instruction.

Poor children are, in general, not read to aloud as often or exposed to complex language and large vocabularies. Their parents have low-wage jobs and are more frequently laid off, causing family stress and more arbitrary discipline. The neighborhoods through which these children walk to school and in which they play have more crime and drugs and fewer adult role models with professional careers. Such children are more often in single-parent families and so get less adult attention. They have fewer cross-country trips, visits to museums and zoos, music or dance lessons, and organized sports leagues to develop their ambition, cultural awareness, and self-confidence.

Each of these disadvantages makes only a small contribution to the achievement gap, but cumulatively, they explain a lot.

I've also noted that no matter how serious their problems, all disadvantaged students can expect to have higher achievement in better schools than in worse ones. And even in the same schools, natural human variability ensures a distribution of achievement in every group. Some high-achieving disadvantaged students always outperform typical middle class students, and some low-achieving middle class students fall behind typical disadvantaged students.

Whose Problem

The achievement gap is a problem of the middle class.

I've drawn observations from my own research on achievement improvement. Without success, the No Child Left Behind law will demerit our schools.

## Distorting

Most educational disadvantage is never, some have a variety of definitions. The implication is that genetic disability can't learn. This highlights the social movement "blames" some findings. "makes excuse" demands for schools off the merit. And other nonschool problems, or household school reform. It, those of us school issues in economic change before we begin.

Some criticized students' scores as proof that is not essential because good students do it on their own mindedly committed that they can't

The achievement gap is a difference in the *average* achievement of students from disadvantaged and middle class families.

I've drawn a policy conclusion from these observations: 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 (like those of No Child Left Behind) that schools fully close achievement gaps not only will remain unfulfilled, but also will cause us to foolishly and unfairly condemn our schools and teachers.

### Distorting Disadvantage

Most educators understand how socioeconomic disadvantage lowers average achievement. However, some have resisted this logic, throwing up a variety of defenses. Some find in my explanations the implication that disadvantaged children have a genetic disability, that poor and minority children can't learn. They say that a perspective that highlights the socioeconomic causes of low achievement "blames the victim" and legitimizes racism. Some find my analysis dangerous because it "makes excuses" for poor instruction or because demands for social and economic reform "let schools off the hook" for raising student achievement. And others say it's too difficult to address nonschool problems like inadequate incomes, health, or housing, so we should only work on school reform. The way some of these critics see it, those of us who call attention to such nonschool issues must wait until utopian economic change (or "socialism") becomes a reality before we begin to improve schools.

Some critics cite schools that enroll disadvantaged students but still get high standardized test scores as proof that greater socioeconomic equality is not essential for closing achievement gaps—because good schools have shown they can do it on their own. And some critics are so single-mindedly committed to a schools-only approach that they can't believe anyone could seriously

advocate pursuing *both* school and socioeconomic improvement simultaneously.

### Seeing Through "No Excuses"

The commonplace "no excuses" ideology implies that educators—were they to realize that their efforts alone were insufficient to raise student achievement—would be too simple-minded then to bring themselves to exert their full effort. The ideology presumes that policymakers with an Olympian perspective can trick teachers into performing at a higher level by making them believe that unrealistically high degrees of success are within reach.

There's a lack of moral, political, and intellectual integrity in this suppression of awareness of how social and economic disadvantage lowers achievement. Our first obligation should be to analyze social problems accurately; only then can we design effective solutions. Presenting a deliberately flawed version of reality, fearing that the truth will lead to excuses, is not only corrupt but also self-defeating.

Mythology cannot, in the long run, inspire better instruction. Teachers see for themselves how poor health or family economic stress impedes students' learning. Teachers may nowadays be intimidated from acknowledging these realities aloud and may, in groupthink obedience, repeat the mantra that "all children can learn." But nobody is fooled. Teachers still know that although all children can learn, some learn less well because of poorer health or less-secure homes. Suppressing such truths leads only to teacher cynicism and disillusion. Talented teachers abandon the profession, willing to shoulder responsibility for their own instructional competence but not for failures 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 seem like failures. If we pretend that achievement gaps are entirely within teachers' control, with claims to the contrary only

"excuses," how can we distinguish better from worse classroom practice?

## Who's Getting Off the Hook?

Promoters of the myth that schools alone can overcome social and economic causes of low achievement assert that claims to the contrary let schools "off the hook." But their myth itself lets political and corporate officials off a hook. We absolve these leaders from responsibility for narrowing the pervasive inequalities of American society by asserting that good schools alone can overcome these inequalities. Forget about health care gaps, racial segregation, inadequate housing, or income insecurity. If, after successful school reform, all adolescents regardless of background could leave high school fully prepared to earn middle class incomes, there would, indeed, be little reason for concern about contemporary inequality. Opportunities of children from all races and ethnic groups, and of rich and poor, would equalize in the next generation solely as a result of improved schooling. This absurd conclusion follows from the "no excuses" approach.

Some critics urge that educators should not acknowledge socioeconomic disadvantage because their unique responsibility is to improve classroom practices, which they *can* control. According to such reasoning, we should leave to health, housing, and labor experts the challenge of worrying about inequalities in their respective fields. Yet we are all citizens in this democracy, and educators have a special and unique insight into the damage that deprivation does to children's learning 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 insist to every politician who will listen (and to those who will not) that social and economic reforms are needed to create an environment in which the most effective teaching can take place.

And yes, we should also call on housing, health, and antipoverty advocates to take a broader view that integrates school improvement into their

advocacy of greater economic and social equality. Instead, however, critical voices for reform 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

It's a canard that educators advocating socioeconomic reforms wish to postpone school improvement until we have created an impractical economic utopia. Another canard is the idea that it's impractical to narrow socioeconomic inequalities, so school reform is the only reasonable lever. Modest social and economic reforms, well within our political reach, could have a palpable effect on student achievement. For example, we could

- Ensure good pediatric and dental care for all students, in school-based clinics.
- Expand existing low-income housing subsidy programs to reduce families' involuntary mobility.
- Provide higher-quality early childhood care so that low-income children are not parked before televisions while their parents are working.
- Increase the earned income tax credit, the minimum wage, and collective bargaining rights so that families of low-wage workers are less stressed.
- Promote mixed-income housing development in suburbs and in gentrifying cities to give more low-income students the benefits of integrated educations in neighborhood schools.
- Fund after-school programs so that inner-city children spend fewer nonschool hours in dangerous environments and, instead, develop their cultural, artistic, organizational, and athletic potential.

None of this is utopian. All is worth doing in itself, with the added benefit of sending children to school more ready to learn. Educators who are unafraid to advocate such policies will finally call the hand of those politicians and business leaders who claim that universal health care is too expensive

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but simultaneously demand school reform so they can posture as defenders of minority children.

In some schools, disadvantaged students are effectively tracked by race, denied the most qualified teachers and the best curriculum. Failure is both expected and accepted. Unfortunately, some educators do use socioeconomic disadvantage as an excuse for failing to teach well under adverse conditions. But we exaggerate the frequency of this excuse. Some teachers excuse poor practice, but others work terribly hard to develop disadvantaged students' talents. Where incompetence does exist, we should insist that school administrators root it out.

But consider this: The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), administered to a national student sample by the federal government, is generally considered the most reliable measure of U.S. students' achievement. Since 1990, the achievement gap between minority and white students has barely changed, feeding accusations that educators simply ignore the needs of minority youth. Yet average math scores of black 4th graders in 2007 were higher than those of white 4th graders in 1990 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007, p. 10). If white achievement had been stagnant, the gap would have fully closed. There were also big math gains for black 8th graders (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007, p. 26). The gap stagnated only because white students also gained.

In reading, scores have remained flat. Perhaps this is because math achievement is a more direct result of school instruction, whereas reading ability also reflects students' home literacy environment. Nonetheless, the dramatic gains in math do not suggest that most teachers of disadvantaged students are sitting around making excuses for failing to teach. Quite the contrary.

### Reticent About Race

It is puzzling that some find racism implied in explanations of why disadvantaged students typically achieve at lower levels. But to understand that children who've been up at night, wheezing from untreated asthma, will be less attentive in

school is not to blame those children for their lower scores. It is to explain that we can enhance those students' capacity to learn with policies that reduce the epidemic incidence of asthma in low-income communities—by enforcing prohibitions on the use of high-sulfur heating oil, for example, or requiring urban buses to substitute natural gas for diesel fuel—or provide pediatric care, including treatment for asthma symptoms. Denying the impact of poor health on learning leads to blaming teachers for circumstances completely beyond their control.

The fact that such conditions affect blacks more than whites reflects racism in the United States. Calling attention to such conditions is not racist. But ignoring them, insisting that they have no effect if teaching is competent, may be.

Some critics lump my analyses of social and economic obstacles with others' claims that "black culture" explains low achievement. Like other overly simplistic explanations of academic failure, cultural explanations can easily be exaggerated. There is, indeed, an apparent black-white test-score gap, even when allegedly poor black and white students are compared with one another or even when middle class black and white students are compared with one another. But these deceptively large gaps mostly stem from too-broad definitions of "poor" and "middle class." Typically, low-income white students are compared with blacks who are much poorer, and middle class black students are compared with whites who are much more affluent. If we restricted comparisons to socioeconomically similar students, the residual test-score gap would mostly disappear (see Phillips, Crouse, & Ralph, 1998).

But probably not all of it. Responsible reformers are seeking to help low-income black parents improve childrearing practices. Others attempt to reduce the influence of gang role models on black adolescents or to raise the status of academic success in black communities. Generally, these reformers are black; white experts avoid such discussions, fearing accusations of racism.

This is too bad. If we're afraid to discuss openly the small contribution that cultural factors make to

achievement gaps, we suggest, falsely, that we're hiding something much bigger.

## Dancing Around the Issue

I am often asked to respond to 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 low-income schools whose parents are unusually well educated; whose admissions policies accept only the most talented disadvantaged students; or whose students, although eligible for subsidized lunches, come from stable working-class and not poor communities.

Some claims are based on schools that concentrate on passing standardized basic skills tests to the exclusion of teaching critical thinking, reasoning, the arts, social studies, or science, or of teaching the “whole child,” as middle class schools are more wont to do. Increasingly, such claims are based on high proportions of students scoring above state proficiency standards, defined at a low level. Certainly, if we define proficiency down, we can more easily reduce achievement gaps without addressing social or economic inequality. But responsible analysts have always defined closing the achievement gap as achieving similar score distributions and average scale scores among subgroups. Even No Child Left Behind proclaims a goal of proficiency at “challenging” levels for each subgroup. Only achieving such goals will lead to

more equal opportunity for all students in the United States.

## Beyond Either/Or

Nobody 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.

## References

- National Center for Education Statistics. (2007). *The nation's report card: Mathematics 2007*. Washington, DC: Author. Available: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationreportcard/pdf/main2007/2007494.pdf>
- Phillips, M., Crouse, J., & Ralph, J. (1998). Does the black-white test score gap widen after children enter school? In C. Jencks & M. Phillips (Eds.), *The black-white test score gap* (pp. 229-272). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

## Note

1. For further discussion of this issue, see my book *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap* (Economic Policy Institute, 2004) and “The Achievement Gap: A Broader Picture” (*Educational Leadership*, November 2004).  
*Author's note:* For documentation of the specific critiques referenced in this article, readers can contact me at [riroth@epi.org](mailto:riroth@epi.org).

## POSTNOTE

In 1966 the U.S. government published a controversial study, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, usually referred to as the Coleman Report, in honor of the lead researcher and author, James

Coleman. One of the main findings of the report was that the family background of a student (socioeconomic status) was a stronger predictor of a student's educational achievement than what

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went on in schools. Children from more privileged families achieved at higher rates than children from less privileged homes.

Richard Rothstein reminds us in this article that if we as a nation want to increase academic achievement among our K–12 students, we must find a way to address the issues of poverty that so strongly affect academic achievement among the poor. We cannot just focus on improving education—standards, assessment, and financing—without also addressing the negative effects of poverty—poor health care, crime, low birth rate, and parental education levels. Unless we attack these poverty issues,

we are not going to achieve the educational outcomes that we seek.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Restate in your own words the relationship between the social and economic disadvantages of poor children and the achievement gap.
2. What do you believe are the key reasons that we have been unable to achieve greater social and economic equality?
3. In your opinion, what ought to be done to promote greater social and economic equality?

## RELATED WEBSITE RESOURCES AND VIDEO CASE

### WEB RESOURCES:

*The Children's Defense Fund.* Available at:  
<http://www.childrensdefense.org>.

The Children's Defense Fund champions policies and programs that lift children out of poverty; protect them from abuse and neglect; and ensure their access to health care, quality education, and a moral and spiritual foundation.

*The Annie E. Casey Foundation.* Available at:  
<http://www.aecf.org>.

The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families.

### ▶▶ TEACHSOURCE VIDEO CASE

#### PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL CULTURE

In this video case you will see how literacy specialist Linda Schwertz engages parents in a book-publishing venture. Go to the website for the Education Media Library at [CengageBrain.com](http://CengageBrain.com) to watch the video clips, study the artifacts in the case, and reflect on the following questions.

1. What ways can you think of to engage parents in their children's school? What ways are demonstrated in this video case?
2. What are the major obstacles that prevent parents from being involved in their children's school, and how can those obstacles be overcome?