



CASCADE POLICY INSTITUTE

# CASCADE COMMENTARY

February 2004 No. 2004-08

## Summary

Minority students can achieve educational excellence. The achievement gap is being closed without more money by schools around the country. They focus on core subjects, give principals authority over budgets and teacher selection, and hold students and adults responsible for results.

Word count: 596

***“Good schools...are closing the achievement gap. The best...are charter schools, free from many rules and regulations that so often frustrate fine principals and teachers.”***

## No excuses for Oregon's achievement gap

by *Abigail Thernstrom, Ph.D.*

There are no good excuses for the achievement gap in Oregon. The state's black and Hispanic students, like those nationally, graduate from high school at much lower rates than do whites. Those who do graduate are less prepared to enter college.

Our failure to provide first-class education for black and Hispanic students is the central civil rights issue of our time. This is not a story about lower IQs. It is a story of kids who have the ability to learn, but who have been tragically—and needlessly—left behind.

Some argue this is not primarily a story about race, but about social class. Parental income, education, and place of residence do make some difference in school achievement. My research and that of others finds, however, that these factors account for only about one-third of the gap in racial achievement.

Unfortunately, frequently proposed solutions—additional school funding, smaller classes, more racial integration, and more teachers with masters degrees in education—won't solve the problem. The research provides little or no support for the claim that these familiar remedies will do the job.

Some think test scores are unimportant. But studies clearly demonstrate that students—whatever their color—who have equal skills and knowledge, as measured by reliable tests, will have roughly equal earnings later in life.

Improving test scores requires better teachers, but the literature shows that neither graduate degrees in education nor years of experience in the classroom have a significant impact on student achievement. The best teachers have strong academic skills, as demonstrated on standardized tests.

So, how do we pull more academically gifted young people into the profession, and keep them where the need is greatest? First, let aspiring teachers skip the schools of education that some say actively promote mediocrity and incompetence. Allow multiple routes into the profession, and reward excellent teachers

with higher pay and more responsibility. Pay more to lure those with rare skills, such as good math and science teachers. And, pay more to outstanding teachers willing to work in schools with high concentrations of disadvantaged students.

Second, insist on a safe and orderly environment in all schools. The level of disorder and disruptive student behavior in many urban public schools is shocking. That's one reason many private schools are able to pay teachers one-third less and still attract very good staff.

Good schools scattered across the country are closing the achievement gap. The best inner-city public schools that I know are charter schools, free from many rules and regulations that so often frustrate fine principals and teachers. They greatly increase instructional time. Principals have authority and autonomy to manage their budgets, set salaries, hire fabulous teachers and show the door to those who don't work out.

These schools focus relentlessly on core academic subjects. They provide safe, orderly environments. They work hard to instill the "desire, discipline, and dedication" (watchwords of the much-celebrated KIPP Academies) that will enable disadvantaged youth to climb the American ladder of opportunity.

Not all charter schools reach these standards, but when they fail they can be closed, as some have been in Oregon and elsewhere. When did you last hear of a regular public school shut down because it wasn't teaching its students well enough?

Change won't be easy. The structure of urban education in Oregon and elsewhere is a fortress against fundamental reform. Yet we either radically overhaul the system, or too many black and Hispanic youngsters continue leaving high school without the skills and knowledge to succeed in life. No decent Oregonian can believe that perpetuating such ancient inequalities is acceptable.

---

*Abigail Thernstrom, Ph.D. serves on the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and the Massachusetts State Board of Education. Co-author of No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning, she is a Senior Fellow at Manhattan Institute in New York and an adjunct scholar at Cascade Policy Institute.*

***“We either radically overhaul the system, or too many black and Hispanic youngsters continue leaving high school without the skills and knowledge to succeed in life.”***

### **Attention editors and producers**

*Cascade Commentaries* are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications, with credit given to author(s) and Cascade. Contact Cascade to arrange print or broadcast interviews on this commentary topic. Electronic text files are available online at [www.cascadepolicy.org/cctext/](http://www.cascadepolicy.org/cctext/).

Please contact:

Kurt T. Weber  
Vice President  
Cascade Policy Institute  
813 SW Alder Street, Suite 450  
Portland, Oregon 97205

Phone: (503) 242-0900  
Fax: (503) 242-3822

[www.cascadepolicy.org](http://www.cascadepolicy.org)  
[kurt@cascadepolicy.org](mailto:kurt@cascadepolicy.org)