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Closing In On Closing the Black/White Educational Achievement Gap (Alan Bonsteel)

The Holy Grail of public education has always been to close the minority/white educational achievement gap. For a while, that seemed to be happening; especially after the civil rights reforms of the 1960s, black Americans' standardized test scores improved significantly compared with those of whites. However, between 1988 and 1994, black reading scores fell dramatically, a decline that mirrored the greatest deterioration in the quality of America's public schools, and since that time those scores have remained flat-line.

The early 1990s saw the birth of publicly-funded schools of choice, including both private schools supported by government scholarships, and charter schools, which are community-run public schools of choice. Despite the lower per-student spending in these schools of choice, and despite accepting less-prepared and largely ethnic minority students whose families were the first to flee public schools, these schools have shown significant improvements in test scores and dramatic decreases in dropout rates.

At first, defenders of the public school establishment disputed the data. As that data has become more and more convincing, the ranks of the defenders of the status quo have thinned.

Among the last and most influential defenders of the public schools has been the New York Times, which only last summer published its first article acknowledging the success of school choice in improving the lives of minority families. However, on Sunday, November 27, in a [powerful and lengthy lead article in its Sunday magazine](#), even the New York Times signaled that it had come over to the side of the reformers.

This astounding article acknowledged the success of many charter schools in closing the black/white achievement gap, and singled out the KIPP ("Knowledge is Power Program") charter schools as having the best shot at closing that achievement gap. These schools, which enroll largely minority kids, were nurtured in 1999 by a grant from California's own Donald Fisher, the founder of

Gap stores, and more recently by Bill Gates. They offer long hours, discipline, and the kind of community and sense of belonging that keeps kids in school.

As amazing as this turnaround by the Times was, more earthshaking still was its condemnation of the status quo, in which it observed: "*The evidence is now overwhelming that if you take an average low-income child and put him into an average American public school, he will almost certainly come out poorly educated.*" (Italics added.)

The Times offered an opportunity for rebuttal to its own former educational columnist, Richard Rothstein, considered by many the most eloquent defender of the nation's public schools.

Rothstein complained that the success of the KIPP schools may not be reproducible, a surprising observation about an educational system that now numbers 52 schools. He notably failed to offer any roadmap for the public school system to close the black/white gap—no plan, no vision, no hope—and in fact explicitly argued that the problems of poor minority kids are simply too great to be overcome by any school, no matter how effective.

The intellectual debate about school choice is now over. The only defenders of the public school monopoly still standing are those who financially benefit from keeping the current broken system on a respirator.

Securing a decent education for the child of the single minority mom who empties the wastebasket at night is the unfinished mission of Abraham Lincoln. The passage of school choice laws throughout the land will bring us the racial equality and integration embodied by Martin Luther King's "I have a dream," and bring us together.

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