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Doogiemonstor Book Review Econ 355 May 15, 2008 No Excuses Synopsis In the US there is an unfortunate reality that exists among low-income K-12 public schools. This national tragedy is the failure to teach children of poor families the necessary skills to make it in the real world. Samuel Casey Carter's *No Excuses*, states that roughly 20 million lower than average income children exist in the K-12 public school system. Of this number, 12 million are not learning the most fundamental skills (1).

His opposition claims that the environment these students experience dooms them to a having a substandard education and as a result a life of poverty. "A child living in an inner city is in school for only so many hours. It's in the rest of the day—as well as the rest of the neighborhood—that's the big influence, and the big problem," (2) Carter disagrees, he believes it is within the means of the public school system to make improvements for underprivileged children whether they are in the classroom or not. He demonstrates through 21 different examples how the principals of particular high- poverty K-12 schools took a leadership role against the "bureaucratic and cultural obstacles," that was keeping their students behind (1).

He dubbed these schools No Excuses Schools. "By studying the traits of these high-performing, high-poverty schools, other schools can replicate their success," (8). His most important claim is in title of the book. That is, there is absolutely No Excuses for children of lesser income families to be subjected to a lower than par education.

“ All children can learn,” (1). The [21 No Excuses Schools] are a disparate but representative group. Three are charter schools. Three are private. One is religious.

One is rural. Fifteen are public schools that draw the majority of their students from their local attendance zones—even if they hardly act like local public schools... The stories told here represent the American experience of education north, south, east, and west—from the Bronx and Los Angeles to rural Arkansas,” (8). This book is not intended to outline how the public school system should be reformed. Instead to sets out to show: the recurrent attributes and effective practices needed to bring a school with low-income children not only out of obscurity but to the ranks of upper percentile scores in math and reading. Principals have a key role in producing this result.

In order to reach excellence principals must be must be competent leaders. If they are not capable of producing results they need to be replaced. In order for a principal to be capable of success they need to be able to: spend their money effectively, recruit the help of parents, and measure and maintain a high quality curriculum. These three qualities together would create what Carter would call a “ culture of achievement. ” Budget constraints often lead to obstacles for the No Excuses principals, however what makes them so distinctive is partly their ability to make a small amount of money go a long way (30).

One great example of this can be seen in the case of Michael Feinberg who is principal of the KIPP charter school in Houston. He says that he looked at KIPP as a business the first day he started working there (30). Feinberg

claims that a large component of his success was due to his meticulously planned fiscal management. The law says that the school district can only provide so much money to KIPP for capital expenses.

As a result KIPP functions at break-even costs. The school spends \$5,650 per child per year. Of this the school has to raise \$850 from private philanthropy. Impressively the average expenditure per child in Texas is \$5462 (and that's without private funding).

With careful planning of coursework and personalized education, KIPP funding is used to give it's students an education puts other Texas schools to shame with no greater resources (31). This is evident in their ability to perform in the 81st percentile for reading (93). Some No Excuses principals do not have the luxury of donations and even if they have efficient budgets cannot obtain the necessary funds for essential and expensive learning tools such as: consumable workbooks and advanced textbooks. Additionally, some low-income schools are required by Central Administration to offer AP courses. These courses are very expensive. It is an outrage to the principals of these schools that they have to cut corners so that their students can be allowed the same opportunities as students that go to better-funded schools.

To combat this budget deficiency they will manipulate their budgets misreport their purchases on their financial statements. For instance some textbooks are often reported as janitorial supply expenses (34). A big part of Carter's book was the need for a more active parent involvement. Many successful principals know that the values of their students are often mirrors

of their parents'. Therefore, if the parent is invested in the child's education this will promote the child's growth and success.

Good principals will establish contracts with parents to help ensure that the adults share the same high standards in academic excellence for their children as the school does. These contracts often include an "outline of the school's mission," "Demand high academic achievement for all," and "outline penalties for non-compliance," (14). Some principals will even go to the extreme to make sure that their students achieve high academic excellence. KIPP, a sister school of the one mentioned earlier, is located in the Bronx.

David Levin is the principal of this school and he establishes a contract with every parent. In this contract the parent agrees that if their student does not perform adequately that they will lose privileges. If the child continues to not make progress they will be expelled. This is where Levin's unorthodox methods really start to show. David is not legally aloud to expel any student (14). Nonetheless he claims that he can and will.

The parents and children never seem to "call his bluff" and students remain in higher than average test score percentiles (85). At the No Excuses schools teachers are held responsible for success of their students. Numerous times throughout the book it is mentioned that if a student isn't learning the teacher isn't teaching. At high quality schools teacher effectiveness is often measured by other teachers as well principals. The faculty that contributes a great deal to this are Master Teachers.

These seasoned veterans have the experience and specialization to help guide newer teachers to excellence. Master Teachers are mentors and gain their rapport not through seniority but through quality. They evaluate other teachers by the means of: “ head peer evaluations, lead team teaching, devise internal assessment measures, and keep the mission of the school focused on academic achievement,”(9). No Excuses Principals will plan their curriculum around the “ unique strengths” and “ expertise” of their staff” (9), and will only hire if they are confident that the new staff will improve performance at their school.

High-performing principals will search for the best teachers in the country. They will interview countless potential employees before finding a right match. Gregory Hodge of the Fredrick Douglass Academy says that he will spend approximately seven months a year trying to recruit teachers and will interview up to 100-150 teachers before he makes the decision to hire (20). Hellen DeBerry was so dedicated to quality that she nearly replaced her entire staff with high-performing teachers. As a result her school, Earhart Elementary, would become “ Chicago’s most single turn-around effort” for an elementary school (20).

These principals all agree that national testing is not the problem. This is contrary to the popular belief that states that bad test scores are the result of a test’s inability to accurately assess the skills of students. Furthermore, the tests are thought to be flawed if one race, class, or gender yields higher test scores than another. For instance some hold the view that poor kids do worse on these tests than rich kids. Their justification is that there are inherent deficiencies in the tests construction (23). Children who are less

fortunate simply do not have the resources that children of higher-income households have.

To retort *No Excuses*, Tom Williams, headmaster of Healthy Start Academy asserts: “ If the achievement scores at the end of the year show bad results, that’s not the tests fault. That shows lousy teaching—The point is what you do with the results no the excuses you make to cover for them, (24). ” The main point that *No Excuses* Principals want to drive home with this topic is that testing is not a discriminatory tool but instead a diagnostic one. They should be used not to identify which demographic groups are better than others, but instead be used to evaluate what teachers can do to prepare their students for future trials. This rejects the notion that bad scores show that students have failed and accepts fact that if this is the case then the teacher, not the student has done poorly.

“ Educators pour all of their energy into cognition studies but they don’t know how students learn—They have all these big Gestalt theories that don’t work. Human beings don’t learn that way. They learn in bits,” (27). High-performing principals all agree. Children must be taught sensibly in small increments that build on each other from the simplest topics to the most advanced.

Steps cannot be skipped in this process. Before moving on to more complicated topics *No Excuses* teachers ensure that students have learned previous material. If they have not they will be given additional instruction before moving on to more advanced topics. *No Excuses* principals put a lot of care into making sure this is how their schools are run. If additional help is

needed that teachers cannot satisfy they will sometimes recruit it from outside the school district. This can include a teaching consultant to help the teachers improve their instruction skills or may include personalized help for the students (26).

The failure to produce high-test scores is reflective of the fact that students have not learned basic skills. Frighteningly, this assertion can be made about the American public school system as a whole. “ American 12th graders now rank dead last among industrial nations in math and science,” (27). Soon it will be very hard to keep up with the rigors of global competition.

Some experts attribute this to the fact that teachers are incorrectly instructing the most basic skills from the get go. This suggests that improperly run schools are not just a problem exclusive to poor children, but it is a national issue that affects everyone. Relative to international skill levels (math, reading, science etc...) this country is lacking, however, if poor children are compared to richer children, in most cases poorer children will yield lower averages in even the most basic of skills (29). While these skills could be improved upon in all schools. In poorer schools the development of these skills needs to be a high priority.

Wealthier students are able to gain these basic skills through out of the classroom opportunities that poorer students do not have. Public schools must find a way to offer these programs. Critique The principals in this study are heroes of the public education system of this county. One question I would really care to explore is whether or not it is realistic for schools in similar situations to take the same steps to reform their schools.

First of all I would like to address the discretion and spending of cash by these 21 Principals; Second I will explore the idea of parents helping; Lastly, I want to discuss the measurement and controlling methods that Carter's No Excuses schools used. Through this I will attempt to discover whether or not the steps these principals took were those of "isolated superstars," (2) or shining examples of what any principal can do to fix their school. Michael Feinberg was able to achieve an incredible amount of philanthropy for the 270 students in his school. 850 dollars per student adds up to \$229, 500 total (31). The amount of money he made is not as important as his ability to effectively and efficiently spend it.

It is still important to note that even with careful financial management many schools do not even have enough cash to buy the most essential supplemental materials. In poor neighborhoods students enter and leave schools at high rates and as a result school budgets are underestimated. This is because in many public schools budgets are based on projected demographics at the beginning of the year not actual ones (34). As a result the curriculum suffers. The public school system would be a better place if students moved from school to school with their allotted money. Carter agrees with this statement (35).

Unfortunately, in order to keep the money with the student it would require a complete change in the financial structure of the public school system. To implement it nationally would be costly and may prove not worth it. It is important to note that No Excuses principals still manage to get around their deficient budgets by doing such things as misreporting their financial statements. These principals although helping their students, are breaking

the law. I do agree that their ends justify their means, but I doubt that other principals in similar situations would do this.

I would care to wager with the justification that most principals are concerned with losing their jobs. For ethical and legal reasons I also think that doing this on a national scale would be unfeasible. The 21 principals and myself can strongly agree that parents need to hold the same high value in their child's education that the school does. Teachers can only do so much. It is up to the parents to ensure that assignments and preparation for tests is done adequately.

It is necessary for the school to sign contracts with parents that will make student's high performance more likely. Also teachers must effectively communicate what's going on in school to help parents be on top of their children's studies. Parents have a big impact on their children's lives especially at a young age. A parent is usually a role model for a child.

Parents must realize their ability to shape their child's ambition and capitalize on it. I agree with Carter that if the students are not learning the material it is not exclusively their fault but also their teachers. Teachers must be willing to put in extra effort so their students receive high percentile scores. When testing students the test should not be blamed especially if it is a standardized test.

The fault is that of the teacher's. If teacher workshops don't yield improved student performance, teachers need to be replaced. The unfortunate reality that goes along with this is that good teachers are in short supply. There are many teachers that suck.

The time spent looking for new teachers could be costly. Also Master Teachers are not easy to obtain as they are often tenured at their school and most likely don't want to leave. Poor students are subject to the unfavorable circumstance that they will not get as good of an education as student who lives in better neighborhood. This is a fact that breaths down the neck of many public educators.

To improve America's public education it would not only require wide-ranging reformation of the American educational system structure, but also a complete shift in the current paradigm of how the Americans view public schools. It must be widely thought that students of any race, class, or gender have the potential excel in academia. If this is not believed than these children will be doomed to failure forever. There are many reasons beyond insufficient funding that cause these low-income schools to be unable provide to provide an adequate education for their students. What will cause the most problems in a school will always be a lack of cash.

If principals had more access to ready money they would have more resources to pool from to increase the quality of school's education. Unfortunately, the funding obtained from these schools is almost always a local income tax on the surrounding neighborhood. Therefore, low-income, low-performing schools must either learn how to affectively optimize expenditures in order to obtain high percentile scores, or find another way to get more funding. Only then will poorer students be allowed the same advantages as students that are better off. Bibliography: No Excuses : Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools by Samuel Casey Carter

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