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What It Takes to Make a Student

By PAUL TOUGH

On the morning of Oct. 5, President Bush and his education secretary, Margaret Spellings, paid a visit, along with camera crews from CNN and Fox News, to Friendship-Woodridge Elementary and Middle Campus, a charter public school in Washington. The president dropped in on two classrooms, where he asked the students, almost all of whom were African-American and poor, if they were planning to go to college. Every hand went up. "See, that's a good sign," the president told the students when they assembled later in the gym. "Going to college is an important goal for the future of the United States of America." He singled out one student, a black eighth grader named Asia Goode, who came to Woodridge four years earlier reading "well below grade level." But things had changed for Asia, according to the president. "Her teachers stayed after school to tutor her, and she caught up," he said. "Asia is now an honors student. She loves reading, and she sings in the school choir."

Bush's Woodridge trip came in the middle of a tough midterm election campaign, and there was certainly some short-term political calculation in being photographed among smiling black faces. But this was more than a photo opportunity. The president had come to Woodridge to talk about the most ambitious piece of domestic legislation his administration had enacted after almost six years in office: No Child Left Behind. The controversial education law, which established a series of standards for schools and states to meet and a variety of penalties for falling short, is up for reauthorization next year in front of a potentially hostile Congress, and for the law to win approval again, the White House will have to convince Americans that it is working – and also convince them of exactly what, in this case, "working" really means.

When the law took effect, at the beginning of 2002, official Washington was preoccupied with foreign affairs, and many people in government, and many outside it too, including the educators most affected by the legislation, seemed slow to take notice of its most revolutionary provision: a pledge to eliminate, in just 12 years, the achievement gap between black and white students, and the one between poor and middle-class students. By 2014, the president vowed, African-American, Hispanic and poor children, all of whom were at the time scoring well below their white counterparts and those in the middle class on standardized tests, would not only catch up with the rest of the nation; they would also reach 100 percent proficiency in both

math and reading. It was a startling commitment, and it made the promise in the law's title a literal one: the federal government would not allow a single American child to be educated to less than that high standard.

It was this element of the law that the president had come to Woodridge to talk about. "There's an achievement gap in America that's not good for the future of this country," he told the crowd. "Some kids can read at grade level, and some can't. And that's unsatisfactory."

But there was good news, the president concluded: "I'm proud to report the achievement gap between white kids and minority students is closing, for the good of the United States."

This contention – that the achievement gap is on its way to the dustbin of history – is one that Bush and Spellings have expressed frequently in the past year. And the gap better be closing: the law is coming up on its fifth anniversary. In just seven more years, if the promise of No Child Left Behind is going to be kept, the performances of white and black students have to be indistinguishable.

But despite the glowing reports from the White House and the Education Department, the most recent iteration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the test of fourth- and eighth-grade students commonly referred to as the nation's report card, is not reassuring. In 2002, when No Child Left Behind went into effect, 13 percent of the nation's black eighth-grade students were "proficient" in reading, the assessment's standard measure of grade-level competence. By 2005 (the latest data), that number had dropped to 12 percent. (Reading proficiency among white eighth-grade students dropped to 39 percent, from 41 percent.) The gap between economic classes isn't disappearing, either: in 2002, 17 percent of poor eighth-grade students (measured by eligibility for free or reduced-price school lunches) were proficient in reading; in 2005, that number fell to 15 percent.

The most promising indications in the national test could be found in the fourth-grade math results, in which the percentage of poor students at the proficient level jumped to 19 percent in 2005, from 8 percent in 2000; for black students, the number jumped to 13 percent, from 5 percent. This was a significant increase, but it was still far short of the proficiency figure for white students, which rose to 47 percent in 2005, and it was a long way from 100 percent.

In the first few years of this decade, two parallel debates about the achievement gap have emerged. The first is about causes; the second is about cures. The first has been taking place in academia, among economists and anthropologists and sociologists who are trying to figure out exactly where the gap comes from, why it exists and why it persists. The second is happening among and around a loose coalition of schools, all of them quite new, all established with the

goal of wiping out the achievement gap altogether.

The two debates seem barely to overlap – the principals don't pay much attention to the research papers being published in scholarly journals, and the academics have yet to study closely what is going on in these schools. Examined together, though, they provide a complete and nuanced picture, sometimes disheartening, sometimes hopeful, of what the president and his education officials are up against as they strive to keep the promise they have made. The academics have demonstrated just how deeply pervasive and ingrained are the intellectual and academic disadvantages that poor and minority students must overcome to compete with their white and middle-class peers. The divisions between black and white and rich and poor begin almost at birth, and they are reinforced every day of a child's life. And yet the schools provide evidence that the president is, in his most basic understanding of the problem, entirely right: the achievement gap can be overcome, in a convincing way, for large numbers of poor and minority students, not in generations but in years. What he and others seem not to have apprehended quite yet is the magnitude of the effort that will be required for that change to take place.

But the evidence is becoming difficult to ignore: when educators do succeed at educating poor minority students up to national standards of proficiency, they invariably use methods that are radically different and more intensive than those employed in most American public schools. So as the No Child Left Behind law comes up for reauthorization next year, Americans are facing an increasingly stark choice: is the nation really committed to guaranteeing that all of the country's students will succeed to the same high level? And if so, how hard are we willing to work, and what resources are we willing to commit, to achieve that goal?

In the years after World War II, and especially after the civil rights reforms of the 1960s, black Americans' standardized-test scores improved steadily and significantly, compared with those of whites. But at some point in the late 1980s, after decades of progress, the narrowing of the gap stalled, and between 1988 and 1994 black reading scores actually fell by a sizable amount on the national assessment. What had appeared to be an inexorable advance toward equality had run out of steam, and African-American schoolchildren seemed to be stuck well behind their white peers.

The issue was complicated by the fact that there are really two overlapping test-score gaps: the one between black children and white children, and the one between poor children and better-off children. Given that those categories tend to overlap – black children are three times as likely to grow up in poverty as white children – many people wondered whether focusing on race was in fact a useful approach. Why not just concentrate on correcting the academic

disadvantages of poor people? Solve those, and the black-white gap will solve itself.

There had, in fact, been evidence for a long time that poor children fell behind rich and middle-class children early, and stayed behind. But researchers had been unable to isolate the reasons for the divergence. Did rich parents have better genes? Did they value education more? Was it that rich parents bought more books and educational toys for their children? Was it because they were more likely to stay married than poor parents? Or was it that rich children ate more nutritious food? Moved less often? Watched less TV? Got more sleep? Without being able to identify the important factors and eliminate the irrelevant ones, there was no way even to begin to find a strategy to shrink the gap.

Researchers began peering deep into American homes, studying up close the interactions between parents and children. The first scholars to emerge with a specific culprit in hand were Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, child psychologists at the University of Kansas, who in 1995 published the results of an intensive research project on language acquisition. Ten years earlier, they recruited 42 families with newborn children in Kansas City, and for the following three years they visited each family once a month, recording absolutely everything that occurred between the child and the parent or parents. The researchers then transcribed each encounter and analyzed each child's language development and each parent's communication style. They found, first, that vocabulary growth differed sharply by class and that the gap between the classes opened early. By age 3, children whose parents were professionals had vocabularies of about 1,100 words, and children whose parents were on welfare had vocabularies of about 525 words. The children's I.Q.'s correlated closely to their vocabularies. The average I.Q. among the professional children was 117, and the welfare children had an average I.Q. of 79.

When Hart and Risley then addressed the question of just what caused those variations, the answer they arrived at was startling. By comparing the vocabulary scores with their observations of each child's home life, they were able to conclude that the size of each child's vocabulary correlated most closely to one simple factor: the number of words the parents spoke to the child. That varied greatly across the homes they visited, and again, it varied by class. In the professional homes, parents directed an average of 487 "utterances" – anything from a one-word command to a full soliloquy – to their children each hour. In welfare homes, the children heard 178 utterances per hour.

What's more, the kinds of words and statements that children heard varied by class. The most basic difference was in the number of "discouragements" a child heard – prohibitions and words of disapproval – compared with the number of encouragements, or words of praise and

approval. By age 3, the average child of a professional heard about 500,000 encouragements and 80,000 discouragements. For the welfare children, the situation was reversed: they heard, on average, about 75,000 encouragements and 200,000 discouragements. Hart and Risley found that as the number of words a child heard increased, the complexity of that language increased as well. As conversation moved beyond simple instructions, it blossomed into discussions of the past and future, of feelings, of abstractions, of the way one thing causes another – all of which stimulated intellectual development.

Hart and Risley showed that language exposure in early childhood correlated strongly with I.Q. and academic success later on in a child's life. Hearing fewer words, and a lot of prohibitions and discouragements, had a negative effect on I.Q.; hearing lots of words, and more affirmations and complex sentences, had a positive effect on I.Q. The professional parents were giving their children an advantage with every word they spoke, and the advantage just kept building up.

In the years since Hart and Risley published their findings, social scientists have examined other elements of the parent-child relationship, and while their methods have varied, their conclusions all point to big class differences in children's intellectual growth. Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, a professor at Teachers College, has overseen hundreds of interviews of parents and collected thousands of hours of videotape of parents and children, and she and her research team have graded each one on a variety of scales. Their conclusion: Children from more well-off homes tend to experience parental attitudes that are more sensitive, more encouraging, less intrusive and less detached – all of which, they found, serves to increase I.Q. and school-readiness. They analyzed the data to see if there was something else going on in middle-class homes that could account for the advantage but found that while wealth does matter, child-rearing style matters more.

Martha Farah, a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, has built on Brooks-Gunn's work, using the tools of neuroscience to calculate exactly which skills poorer children lack and which parental behaviors affect the development of those skills. She has found, for instance, that the "parental nurturance" that middle-class parents, on average, are more likely to provide stimulates the brain's medial temporal lobe, which in turn aids the development of memory skills.

Another researcher, an anthropologist named Annette Lareau, has investigated the same question from a cultural perspective. Over the course of several years, Lareau and her research assistants observed a variety of families from different class backgrounds, basically moving in to each home for three weeks of intensive scrutiny. Lareau found that the middle-class families

she studied all followed a similar strategy, which she labeled concerted cultivation. The parents in these families engaged their children in conversations as equals, treating them like apprentice adults and encouraging them to ask questions, challenge assumptions and negotiate rules. They planned and scheduled countless activities to enhance their children's development – piano lessons, soccer games, trips to the museum.

The working-class and poor families Lareau studied did things differently. In fact, they raised their children the way most parents, even middle-class parents, did a generation or two ago. They allowed their children much more freedom to fill in their afternoons and weekends as they chose – playing outside with cousins, inventing games, riding bikes with friends – but much less freedom to talk back, question authority or haggle over rules and consequences. Children were instructed to defer to adults and treat them with respect. This strategy Lareau named accomplishment of natural growth.

In her book “Unequal Childhoods,” published in 2003, Lareau described the costs and benefits of each approach and concluded that the natural-growth method had many advantages. Concerted cultivation, she wrote, “places intense labor demands on busy parents. ... Middle-class children argue with their parents, complain about their parents' incompetence and disparage parents' decisions.” Working-class and poor children, by contrast, “learn how to be members of informal peer groups. They learn how to manage their own time. They learn how to strategize.” But outside the family unit, Lareau wrote, the advantages of “natural growth” disappear. In public life, the qualities that middle-class children develop are consistently valued over the ones that poor and working-class children develop. Middle-class children become used to adults taking their concerns seriously, and so they grow up with a sense of entitlement, which gives them a confidence, in the classroom and elsewhere, that less-wealthy children lack. The cultural differences translate into a distinct advantage for middle-class children in school, on standardized achievement tests and, later in life, in the workplace.

Taken together, the conclusions of these researchers can be a little unsettling. Their work seems to reduce a child's upbringing, which to a parent can feel something like magic, to a simple algorithm: give a child X, and you get Y. Their work also suggests that the disadvantages that poverty imposes on children aren't primarily about material goods. True, every poor child would benefit from having more books in his home and more nutritious food to eat (and money certainly makes it easier to carry out a program of concerted cultivation). But the real advantages that middle-class children gain come from more elusive processes: the language that their parents use, the attitudes toward life that they convey. However you measure child-rearing, middle-class parents tend to do it differently than poor parents – and the path they follow in turn tends to give their children an array of advantages. As Lareau points out, kids

from poor families might be nicer, they might be happier, they might be more polite – but in countless ways, the manner in which they are raised puts them at a disadvantage in the measures that count in contemporary American society.

What would it take to overcome these disadvantages? Does poverty itself need to be eradicated, or can its effects on children somehow be counteracted? Can the culture of child-rearing be changed in poor neighborhoods, and if so, is that a project that government or community organizations have the ability, or the right, to take on? Is it enough simply to educate poor children in the same way that middle-class children are educated? And can any school, on its own, really provide an education to poor minority students that would allow them to achieve the same results as middle-class students?

There is, in fact, evidence emerging that some schools are succeeding at the difficult task of educating poor minority students to high levels of achievement. But there is still great disagreement about just how many schools are pulling this off and what those successful schools mean for the rest of the American education system. One well-publicized evaluation of those questions has come from the Education Trust, a policy group in Washington that has issued a series of reports making the case that there are plenty of what they call “high flying” schools, which they define as high-poverty or high-minority schools whose students score in the top third of all schools in their state. The group’s landmark report, published in December 2001, identified 1,320 “high flying” schools nationwide that were both high-poverty and high minority. This was a big number, and it had a powerful effect on the debate over the achievement gap. The pessimists – those who believed that the disadvantages of poverty were all but impossible to overcome in public schools – were dealt a serious blow. If the report’s figures held up, it meant that high achievement for poor minority kids was not some one-in-a-million occurrence; it was happening all the time, all around us.

But in the years since the report’s release, its conclusions have been challenged by scholars and analysts who have argued that the Education Trust made it too easy to be included on their list. To be counted as a high-flier, a school needed to receive a high score in only one subject in one grade in one year. If your school had a good fourth-grade reading score, it was on the list, even if all its other scores were mediocre. To many researchers, that was an unconvincing standard of academic success. Douglas Harris, a professor of education and economics at Florida State University, pored over Education Trust’s data, trying to ascertain how many of the high-flying schools were able to register consistently good numbers. When he tightened the definition of success to include only schools that had high scores in two subjects in two different grades over two different years, Harris could find only 23 high-poverty, high-minority schools in the Education Trust’s database, a long way down from 1,320.

That number isn't exhaustive; Harris says he has no doubt that there are some great schools that slipped through his data sieve. But his results still point to a very different story than the one the original report told. Education Trust officials intended their data to refute the idea that family background is the leading cause of student performance. But on closer examination, their data largely confirm that idea, demonstrating clearly that the best predictors of a school's achievement scores are the race and wealth of its student body. A public school that enrolls mostly well-off white kids has a 1 in 4 chance of earning consistently high test scores, Harris found; a school with mostly poor minority kids has a 1 in 300 chance.

Despite those long odds, the last decade – and especially the last few years – have seen the creation of dozens, even hundreds, of schools across the country dedicated to precisely that mission: delivering consistently high results with a population that generally achieves consistently low results. The schools that have taken on this mission most aggressively tend to be charter schools – the publicly financed, privately run institutions that make up one of the most controversial educational experiments of our time. Because charters exist outside the control of public-school boards and are generally not required to adhere to union contracts with their teachers, they have attracted significant opposition, and their opponents are able to point to plenty of evidence that the charter project has failed. Early charter advocates claimed the schools would raise test scores across the board, and that hasn't happened; nationally, scores for charter-school students are the same as or lower than scores for public-school students. But by another measure, charter schools have succeeded: by allowing educators to experiment in ways that they generally can't inside public-school systems, they have led to the creation of a small but growing corps of schools with new and ambitious methods for educating students facing real academic challenges.

In the early years of the charter-school movement, every school was an island, trying out its own mad or brilliant educational theory. But as charter-school proponents have studied the successes and learned from the mistakes of their predecessors, patterns, even a consensus, have begun to emerge. The schools that are achieving the most impressive results with poor and minority students tend to follow three practices. First, they require many more hours of class time than a typical public school. The school day starts early, at 8 a.m. or before, and often continues until after 4 p.m. These schools offer additional tutoring after school as well as classes on Saturday mornings, and summer vacation usually lasts only about a month. The schools try to leaven those long hours with music classes, foreign languages, trips and sports, but they spend a whole lot of time going over the basics: reading and math.

Second, they treat classroom instruction and lesson planning as much as a science as an art. Explicit goals are set for each year, month and day of each class, and principals have

considerable authority to redirect and even remove teachers who aren't meeting those goals. The schools' leaders believe in frequent testing, which, they say, lets them measure what is working and what isn't, and they use test results to make adjustments to the curriculum as they go. Teachers are trained and retrained, frequently observed and assessed by their principals and superintendents. There is an emphasis on results but also on "team building" and cooperation and creativity, and the schools seem, to an outsider at least, like genuinely rewarding places to work, despite the long hours. They tend to attract young, enthusiastic teachers, including many alumni of Teach for America, the program that recruits graduates from top universities to work for two years in inner-city public schools.

Third, they make a conscious effort to guide the behavior, and even the values, of their students by teaching what they call character. Using slogans, motivational posters, incentives, encouragements and punishments, the schools direct students in everything from the principles of teamwork and the importance of an optimistic outlook to the nuts and bolts of how to sit in class, where to direct their eyes when a teacher is talking and even how to nod appropriately.

The schools are, in the end, a counterintuitive combination of touchy-feely idealism and intense discipline. Their guiding philosophy is in many ways a reflection of the findings of scholars like Lareau and Hart and Risley – like those academics, these school leaders see childhood as a series of inputs and outputs. When students enroll in one of these schools (usually in fifth or sixth grade), they are often two or more grade levels behind. Usually they have missed out on many of the millions of everyday intellectual and emotional stimuli that their better-off peers have been exposed to since birth. They are, educationally speaking, in deep trouble. The schools reject the notion that all that these struggling students need are high expectations; they do need those, of course, but they also need specific types and amounts of instruction, both in academics and attitude, to compensate for everything they did not receive in their first decade of life.

It is still too early in the history of this nascent movement to say which schools are going to turn out to be the most successful with this new approach to the education of poor children. But so far, the most influential schools are the ones run by KIPP, or the Knowledge Is Power Program. KIPP's founders, David Levin and Michael Feinberg, met in 1992, when they were young college graduates enrolled in Teach for America, working in inner-city public schools in Houston. They struggled at first as teachers but were determined to figure out how to motivate and educate their students. Each night they would compare notes on what worked in the classroom – songs, games, chants, rewards – and, before long, both of them became expert classroom instructors.

In the fall of 1994, Levin and Feinberg started a middle school in Houston, teaching just 50 students, and they named it KIPP. A year later, Levin moved to New York and started the second KIPP school, in the South Bronx. As the KIPP schools grew, Levin and Feinberg adhered to a few basic principles: their mission was to educate low-income and minority students. They would emphasize measurable results. And they would promise to do whatever it took to help their students succeed. They offered an extended day and an extended year that provided KIPP students with about 60 percent more time in school than most public-school students. They set clear and strict rules of conduct: their two principles of behavior were “Work Hard” and “Be Nice,” and all the other rules flowed out of those. At the beginning of each year, parents and students signed a pledge – unenforceable but generally taken seriously – committing to certain standards of hard work and behavior. Teachers gave students their cellphone numbers so students could call them at night for homework help.

The methods raised students’ test scores, and the schools began to attract the attention of the media and of philanthropists. A “60 Minutes” report on the schools in 1999 led to a \$15 million grant from Doris and Donald Fisher, the founders of the Gap, and Feinberg and Levin began gradually to expand KIPP into a national network. Two years ago, they received \$8 million from the Gates Foundation to create up to eight KIPP high schools. There are now 52 KIPP schools across the country, almost all middle schools, and together they are educating 12,000 children. The network is run on a franchise model; each school’s principal has considerable autonomy, while quality control is exercised from the home office in San Francisco. Feinberg is the superintendent of KIPP’s eight schools in Houston, and Levin is the superintendent of the four New York City schools.

KIPP is part of a loose coalition with two other networks of charter schools based in and around New York City. One is Achievement First, which grew out of the success of Amistad Academy, a charter school in New Haven that was founded in 1999. Achievement First now runs six schools in New Haven and Brooklyn. The other network is Uncommon Schools, which was started by a founder of North Star Academy in Newark along with principals from three acclaimed charter schools in Massachusetts; it now includes seven schools in Rochester, Newark and Brooklyn. The connections among the three networks are mostly informal, based on the friendships that bind Levin to Norman Atkins, the former journalist who founded North Star, and to Dacia Toll, the Rhodes scholar and Yale Law graduate who started Amistad with Doug McCurry, a former teacher. Toll and Atkins visited Levin at the Bronx KIPP Academy when they were setting up their original schools and studied the methods he was using; they later sent their principals to the leadership academy that Levin and Feinberg opened in 2000, and they have continued to model many of their practices on KIPP’s. Now the schools are beginning to formalize their ties. As they each expand their charters to include high schools,

Levin, Toll and Atkins are working on a plan to bring students from all three networks together under one roof.

Students at both KIPP and Achievement First schools follow a system for classroom behavior invented by Levin and Feinberg called Slant, which instructs them to sit up, listen, ask questions, nod and track the speaker with their eyes. When I visited KIPP Academy last month, I was standing with Levin at the front of a music class of about 60 students, listening to him talk, when he suddenly interrupted himself and pointed at me. “Do you notice what he’s doing right now?” he asked the class.

They all called out at once, “Nodding!”

Levin’s contention is that Americans of a certain background learn these methods for taking in information early on and employ them instinctively. KIPP students, he says, need to be taught the methods explicitly. And so it is a little unnerving to stand at the front of a KIPP class; every eye is on you. When a student speaks, every head swivels to watch her. To anyone raised in the principles of progressive education, the uniformity and discipline in KIPP classrooms can be off-putting. But the kids I spoke to said they use the Slant method not because they fear they will be punished otherwise but because it works: it helps them to learn. (They may also like the feeling of having their classmates’ undivided attention when they ask or answer a question.) When Levin asked the music class to demonstrate the opposite of Slanting – “Give us the normal school look,” he said – the students, in unison, all started goofing off, staring into space and slouching. Middle-class Americans know intuitively that “good behavior” is mostly a game with established rules; the KIPP students seemed to be experiencing the pleasure of being let in on a joke.

Still, Levin says that the innovations a visitor to a KIPP school might notice first – the Slanting and the walls festooned with slogans and mottos (“Team Always Beats Individual,” “All of Us Will Learn”) and the orderly rows of students walking in the hallways – are not the only things contributing to the schools’ success. Equally important, he says, are less visible practices: clear and coherent goals for each class; teachers who work 15 to 16 hours a day; careful lesson planning; and a decade’s worth of techniques, tricks, games and chants designed to help vast amounts of information penetrate poorly educated brains very quickly.

Toll and Levin are influenced by the writings of a psychology professor from the University of Pennsylvania named Martin Seligman, the author of a series of books about positive psychology. Seligman, one of the first modern psychologists to study happiness, promotes a technique he calls learned optimism, and Toll and Levin consider it an essential part of the attitude they are trying to instill in their students. Last year, a graduate student of Seligman’s

named Angela Duckworth published with Seligman a research paper that demonstrated a guiding principle of these charter schools: in many situations, attitude is just as important as ability. Duckworth studied 164 eighth-grade students in Philadelphia, tracking each child's I.Q. as well as his or her score on a test that measured self-discipline and then correlating those two numbers with the student's G.P.A. Surprisingly, she found that the self-discipline scores were a more accurate predictor of G.P.A. than the I.Q. scores by a factor of two. Duckworth's paper connects with a new wave of research being done around the country showing that "noncognitive" abilities like self-control, adaptability, patience and openness – the kinds of qualities that middle-class parents pass on to their children every day, in all kinds of subtle and indirect ways – have a huge and measurable impact on a child's future success.

Levin considers Duckworth's work an indication of the practical side of the "character" education he and Toll and Atkins are engaged in: they want their students to be well behaved and hard-working and respectful because it's a good way to live but also because the evidence is clear that people who act that way get higher marks in school and better jobs after school. To Toll, a solid character is a basic building block of her students' education. "I think we have to teach work ethic in the same way we have to teach adding fractions with unlike denominators," she told me. "But once children have got the work ethic and the commitment to others and to education down, it's actually pretty easy to teach them. "

The schools that Toll, Atkins, Levin and Feinberg run are not racially integrated. Most of the 70 or so schools that make up their three networks have only one or two white children enrolled, or none at all. Although as charter schools, their admission is open through a lottery to any student in the cities they serve, their clear purpose is to educate poor black and Hispanic children. The guiding principle for the four school leaders, all of whom are white, is an unexpected twist on the "separate but equal" standard: they assert that for these students, an "equal" education is not good enough. Students who enter middle school significantly behind grade level don't need the same good education that most American middle-class students receive; they need a better education, because they need to catch up. Toll, especially, is preoccupied with the achievement gap: her schools' stated mission is to close the gap entirely. "The promise in America is that if you work hard, if you make good decisions, that you'll be able to be successful," Toll explained to me. "And given the current state of public education in a lot of our communities, that promise is just not true. There's not a level playing field." In Toll's own career, in fact, the goal of achieving equality came first, and the tool of education came later. When she was at Yale Law School, her plan was to become a civil rights lawyer, but she concluded that she could have more of an impact on the nation's inequities by founding a charter school.

The methods these educators use seem to work: students at their schools consistently score well on statewide standardized tests. At North Star this year, 93 percent of eighth-grade students were proficient in language arts, compared with 83 percent of students in New Jersey as a whole; in math, 77 percent were proficient, compared with 71 percent of students in the state as a whole. At Amistad, proficiency scores for the sixth grade over the last few years range between the mid-30s and mid-40s, only a bit better than the averages for New Haven; by the eighth grade, they are in the 60s, 70s and 80s – in every case exceeding Connecticut’s average (itself one of the highest in the country). At KIPP’s Bronx academy, the sixth, seventh and eighth grades had proficiency rates at least 12 percentage points above the state average on this year’s statewide tests. And when the scores are compared with the scores of the specific high-poverty cities or neighborhoods where the schools are located – in Newark, New Haven or the Bronx – it isn’t even close: 86 percent of eighth-grade students at KIPP Academy scored at grade level in math this year, compared with 16 percent of students in the South Bronx.

The leaders of this informal network are now wrestling with an unintended consequence of their schools’ positive results and high profiles: their incoming students are sometimes too good. At some schools, students arrive scoring better than typical children in their neighborhoods, presumably because the school’s reputation is attracting more-engaged parents with better-prepared kids to its admission lottery. Even though almost every student at the KIPP Academy in the Bronx, for example, is from a low-income family, and all but a few are either black or Hispanic, and most enter below grade level, they are still a step above other kids in the neighborhood; on their math tests in the fourth grade (the year before they arrived at KIPP), KIPP students in the Bronx scored well above the average for the district, and on their fourth-grade reading tests they often scored above the average for the entire city.

At most schools, well-prepared incoming students would be seen as good news. But at these charter schools, they can be a mixed blessing. Although the schools have demonstrated an impressive and consistent ability to turn below-average poor minority students into above-average students, another part of their mission is to show that even the most academically challenged students can succeed using their methods. But if not enough of those students are attending their schools, it’s hard to make that point. North Star’s leaders say this problem doesn’t apply to them: the school’s fifth-grade students come in with scores that are no higher than the Newark average. At KIPP, Levin and other officials I talked to say that their schools do what they can to recruit applicants who are representative of the neighborhoods they serve, but they also say that once a class is chosen (and at all the charter schools, it is chosen by random lottery), their job is to educate those children to the best of their ability. Dacia Toll is more focused on the issue; she says that she and her principals make a special effort to recruit students from particularly blighted neighborhoods and housing projects in New Haven and

Brooklyn and told me that it would “absolutely be a cause for concern” if Amistad seemed to be attracting students who were better-prepared than average.

The most persistent critic of KIPP’s record has been Richard Rothstein, a former education columnist for The New York Times who is now a lecturer at Teachers College. He has asserted that KIPP’s model cannot be replicated on a wide scale and argues that the elevated incoming scores at the Bronx school make it mostly irrelevant to the national debate over the achievement gap. Although Rothstein acknowledges that KIPP’s students are chosen by lottery, he contends in his book “Class and Schools” that they are “not typical lower-class students.” The very fact that their parents would bother to enroll them in the lottery sets them apart from other inner-city children, he says, adding that there is “no evidence” that KIPP’s strategy “would be as successful for students whose parents are not motivated to choose such a school.”

In some ways, the debate seems a trivial one – KIPP is clearly doing a great job of educating its students; do the incoming scores at a single school really matter? But in fact, KIPP, along with Uncommon Schools and Achievement First, is now at the center of a heated political debate over just how much schools can accomplish, and that has brought with it a new level of public scrutiny. Beginning in the late 1990s, KIPP, Amistad and North Star were embraced by advocates from the right who believed in the whole menu of conservative positions on education: school choice, vouchers, merit pay for teachers. In 2001, the Heritage Foundation profiled the KIPP schools in a book called “No Excuses: Lessons From 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools,” which set out to disprove “the perennial claims of the education establishment that poor children are uneducable.” Two years later, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, the well-known conservative writers about race, borrowed the Heritage Foundation’s title (which was itself borrowed from a slogan popular at KIPP and other schools) for their own book on education, “No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning”; the book used the success of Amistad, North Star and, especially, KIPP to highlight the failings of the public-school system in serving poor children. If KIPP can successfully educate these kids, the Thernstroms asked, why can’t every school?

The Thernstroms argue that if we can just fix the schools where poor children are educated, it will become much easier to solve all the other problems of poverty. The opposing argument, which Rothstein and others have made, is that the problems of poor minority kids are simply too great to be overcome by any school, no matter how effective. He points to the work of Hart and Risley and Lareau and argues that the achievement gap can be significantly diminished only by correcting, or at least addressing, the deep inequities that divide the races and the classes.

Levin and Toll sometimes seem surprised by the political company they are now keeping – and by the opponents they have attracted. “I’m a total liberal!” Toll said, a little defensively, when I asked her recently about this political divide. Many charter advocates claim that the views of Democratic politicians on charter schools are clouded by the fact that they depend for both money and votes on the nation’s teachers’ unions, which are skeptical of charter schools and in some states have taken steps to block them from expanding. In Connecticut, the state teachers’ union this year lobbied against a legislative change to allow for the expansion of Amistad Academy (it later passed), and the union’s lawyers filed a Freedom of Information Act request that required Amistad to turn over all of its employment and pay records. The union’s chief lobbyist told reporters in April that the state’s charter law was intended only “to create incubators of innovation. It was never to create a charter-school system.” Amistad was acceptable as a small experiment, in other words, but there was no reason to let it grow.

Even if schools like KIPP are allowed to expand to meet the demand in the educational marketplace – all of them have long waiting lists – it is hard to imagine that, alone, they will be able to make much of a dent in the problem of the achievement gap; there are, after all, millions of poor and minority public-school students who aren’t getting the education they need either at home or in the classroom. What these charter schools demonstrate, though, is the effort that would be required to provide those students with that education.

Toll put it this way: “We want to change the conversation from ‘You can’t educate these kids’ to ‘You can only educate these kids if. ...’ ” And to a great extent, she and the other principals have done so. The message inherent in the success of their schools is that if poor students are going to catch up, they will require not the same education that middle-class children receive but one that is considerably better; they need more time in class than middle-class students, better-trained teachers and a curriculum that prepares them psychologically and emotionally, as well as intellectually, for the challenges ahead of them.

Right now, of course, they are not getting more than middle-class students; they are getting less. For instance, nationwide, the best and most experienced teachers are allowed to choose where they teach. And since most state contracts offer teachers no bonus or incentive for teaching in a school with a high population of needy children, the best teachers tend to go where they are needed the least. A study that the Education Trust issued in June used data from Illinois to demonstrate the point. Illinois measures the quality of its teachers and divides their scores into four quartiles, and those numbers show glaring racial inequities. In majority-white schools, bad teachers are rare: just 11 percent of the teachers are in the lowest quartile. But in schools with practically no white students, 88 percent of the teachers are in the worst quartile. The same disturbing pattern holds true in terms of poverty. At schools where more

than 90 percent of the students are poor – where excellent teachers are needed the most – just 1 percent of teachers are in the highest quartile.

Government spending on education does not tend to compensate for these inequities; in fact, it often makes them worse. Goodwin Liu, a law professor at the University of California at Berkeley, has compiled persuasive evidence for what he calls the country's "education apartheid." In states with more poor children, spending per pupil is lower. In Mississippi, for instance, it is \$5,391 a year; in Connecticut, it is \$9,588. Most education financing comes from state and local governments, but the federal supplement for poor children, Title 1, is "regressive," Liu points out, because it is tied to the amount each state spends. So the federal government gives Arkansas \$964 to help educate each poor child in the state, and it gives Massachusetts \$2,048 for each poor child there.

Without making a much more serious commitment to the education of poor and minority students, it is hard to see how the federal government will be able to deliver on the promise contained in No Child Left Behind. The law made states responsible for turning their poorest children into accomplished scholars in a little more than a decade – a national undertaking on the order of a moon landing – but provided them with little assistance or even direction as to how they might accomplish that goal. And recently, many advocates have begun to argue that the Education Department has quietly given up on No Child Left Behind.

The most malignant element of the original law was that it required all states to achieve proficiency but then allowed each state to define proficiency for itself. It took state governments a couple of years to realize just what that meant, but now they have caught on – and many of them are engaged in an ignoble competition to see which state can demand the least of its students. At the head of this pack right now is Mississippi, which has declared 89 percent of its fourth-grade students to be proficient readers, the highest percentage in the nation, while in fact, the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that only 18 percent of Mississippi fourth graders know how to read at an appropriate level – the second-lowest score of any state. In the past year, Arizona, Maryland, Ohio, North Dakota and Idaho all followed Mississippi's lead and slashed their standards in order to allow themselves to label uneducated students educated. The federal government has permitted these maneuvers, and after several years of tough talk about enforcing the law's standards, the Education Department has in the past year begun cutting one deal after another with states that want to redefine "success" for their schools. (When I spoke to Spellings this month, she said she would "appeal to the better angels of governors and state policy makers" to keep their standards in line with national benchmarks.)

The absence of any robust federal effort to improve high-poverty schools undercuts and distorts the debate over the responsibility for their problems. It is true, as the Thernstroms write in their book, that “dysfunctional families and poverty are no excuse for widespread, chronic educational failure.” But while those factors are not an excuse, they’re certainly an explanation; as researchers like Lareau and Brooks-Gunn have made clear, poverty and dysfunction are enormous disadvantages for any child to overcome. When Levin and Feinberg began using the slogan “No Excuses” in the mid-1990s, they intended it to motivate their students and teachers, to remind them that within the context of a KIPP school, there would always be a way to achieve success. But when the conservative education movement adopted “No Excuses” as a slogan, the phrase was used much more broadly: if that rural Arkansas public school isn’t achieving the success of a KIPP school, those responsible for its underachievement must simply be making excuses. The slogan came to suggest that what is going wrong in the schools is simply some sort of failure of will – that teachers don’t want to work hard, or don’t believe in their students, or are succumbing to what the president calls “the soft bigotry of low expectations” – while the reality is that even the best, most motivated educator, given just six hours a day and 10 months a year and nothing more than the typical resources provided to a public-school teacher, would find it near impossible to educate an average classroom of poor minority students up to the level of their middle-class peers.

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. What the small but growing number of successful schools demonstrate is that the public-school system accomplishes that result because we have built it that way. We could also decide to create a different system, one that educates most (if not all) poor minority students to high levels of achievement. It is not yet entirely clear what that system might look like – it might include not only KIPP-like structures and practices but also high-quality early-childhood education, as well as incentives to bring the best teachers to the worst schools – but what is clear is that it is within reach.

Although the failure of No Child Left Behind now seems more likely than not, it is not too late for it to succeed. We know now, in a way that we did not when the law was passed, what it would take to make it work. And if the law does, in the end, fail – if in 2014 only 20 or 30 or 40 percent of the country’s poor and minority students are proficient, then we will need to accept that its failure was not an accident and was not inevitable, but was the outcome we chose.

Paul Tough is an editor at the magazine. He is writing a book about the Harlem Children’s Zone, a community organization.

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