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Our Schools Suck: Students Talk Back to a Segregated Nation on the Failures of Urban Education		
Author:	Gaston Alonso, Noel S. Anderson, Celina Su, & Jeanne Theoharis (2009)	
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In *Our Schools Suck*, authors Gaston Alonso, Noel Anderson, Celina Su, and Jeanne Theoharis seek to generate qualitative understandings of why, in the context of U.S. public education, African American and Latino students in urban schools constantly underachieve. To that end, three of the authors (Anderson, Su, and Theoharis) conduct ethnographic studies in New York and Los Angeles, the two largest cities in the U.S.A., to find out why many of these schools have such high dropout rates and constantly score below average on standardized tests. The major focus of *Our Schools Suck* is a critical examination of how *Brown v. Board of Education* has failed to take hold in these urban centers to provide students with an education equitable to that of schools are found in suburban areas. The authors display how the popular media has constantly disparaged this segment of the population. Many prominent members of both the African American and Latino communities have used their positions to belittle the problems that plague those who live in the inner city, instead blaming them for promoting a “culture of failure.” Nonetheless, the authors go on to show that many of the students that are languishing in these failing schools place a high value on education, but that their schools are violent, decrepit, overcrowded, poorly staffed, and

under funded. Students long for opportunities to learn, but when they don't find these readily available; many students fall through the cracks.

In the fifty years since the Supreme Court ruled that separate and unequal facilities were unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education*, minority students in inner cities all over the nation have continued to fail to close the racial achievement gap. As a result, numerous editorials, books, and most notably a speech by Bill Cosby, blamed the students themselves for not taking advantage of the opportunities that were available to them. Social scientists, such as John Ogbu, Orlando Patterson, and John McWhorter, identified a so-called phenomenon that equated academic achievement with "acting white" as the reason that most minority students tried to avoid excelling in academics. They speculated that minorities, especially males, projected their energy into trying to maintain an air of toughness or "cool pose". This was coupled with the theory that the cultures of certain minority groups, such as African Americans and Latinos did not value education and as a result, the solution to the problem lie with the culture and not with economic policy or structure. These ideas, though not substantiated by data, found their way into mainstream. Policy makers used this to justify the creation and implementation of policies that unfairly compromised the education of the minority students attending schools in urban areas.

Each of the researchers looks at how the unequal facilities that students residing in the inner city are forced to attend. Most of these urban schools are majority non-white, as during the years following *Brown v. Board of Education*, many white families fled to the suburbs. Due to lack of funding, these schools are grossly overcrowded, with some enrolling as many as 5,000 students, despite having a much smaller capacity. As a result, some of the schools have year-round scheduling, with students attending in tracks that may have as much as two months off at a time during the middle of the school year. Furthermore, overcrowding causes class sizes to be exceptionally large, up into the fifties. Yet, teachers may only have 35 desks, meaning that the remaining students must either sit at the teacher's desk, on the radiators, or stand for an entire class period. Teachers actually rely on truancy, in hopes that absenteeism will reduce class size enough to make it manageable. Many of these schools had failing facilities, but were constantly in use year-round, which turned repairs into a nuisance. One striking commonality was that many of these schools lacked working bathrooms. Some schools only had one working restroom for populations of 3000-5000 students and even then, the bathroom that worked was off-limits and locked during the majority of the school day. Teachers who either lacked credentials or were substitutes taught many classrooms. The curriculum and pedagogy of these schools were found to be severely lacking, as teachers worked to meet adequate yearly progress, on standardized tests. Many teachers used worksheets and "drill and kill" strategies to "teach to the test". Some of these schools received funding that was up to 10 times less than schools in surrounding, more affluent areas. The funding that the schools did receive was often used for safety measures, such as the installation of metal detectors, causing students to have to wait in long lines just to enter school each day.

Su introduces readers to a Latino student who provides spoken word poetry throughout the introduction. He is introduced as having the appearance typical of the Latino adolescent male

in America. He is a high-school dropout and had attended Dewitt Clinton High School in New York City. However, it is soon realized that his story is not as simple as one may think. He had been an honors student but when the school system loses his high school registration, he is placed at Clinton High and suffered through being placed in classes where teachers taught material that he learned in middle school, being labeled a troublemaker because of his questioning nature, and having to sit on a radiator during class because there were no desks available before deciding not to return to school. Su looks in-depth at the student organization, Sistas and Brothers United (SBU) that this student joins, which teaches minority students how to research policy and how to advocate for their schools. These students learn how to navigate the bureaucracy in New York City government to reach the policymakers and show them that these students do care, but are being unfairly treated.

Theoharis spends a school year teaching at one of the worst schools in Los Angeles, Fremont High, where class sizes often reached the fifties. Students here had no access to bathrooms and often urinated on the side of the building. There was only one lunch period, with many students unable to find a place to eat and heating and cooling were inconsistent within the classrooms. The school also only had one college counselor despite having 5,000 students. Theoharis assigns students in a history class to write weekly in a journal. Students often write about their goals and how they genuinely want an education, but find that is unattainable, due to the conditions of the school. She finds that rather than being the troublemakers that they are portrayed as in the media, these were students who not only needed, but also wanted to learn and better themselves.

Anderson worked with a college preparatory program in New York, where he followed the paths of four male students as they tried to navigate high school and the path into college. The students often lamented that there were no jobs available in their neighborhoods and that they couldn't get hired in other neighborhoods. Many of the jobs in their neighborhoods went to low-skilled adults. Additionally, the students recalled instances of racial profiling in stores, as well as one male who had worked at an athletic store, discussed how he had been asked to watch the minority teenagers that came in the store as a part of his job. Many employers didn't take the teenagers seriously, assuming that they just wanted a job for extra spending money and not realizing that these students were often trying to help support their families as well. Anderson looks at how the system encourages students to get an education to find a job; yet, from their experiences, they know that there are no jobs available.

The authors conclude with suggestions that policymakers should consider to help get these inner city schools on par with their suburban counterparts. The problem lies not with the students or the community and culture that they are a part of, but with the policymakers that feel that this type of *de jure* segregation and inequitable practices are acceptable fifty years after the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional. The majority of students living in urban, poverty-stricken areas will never get ahead if they are doomed to schools that are under funded. Policy makers must rethink how public schools are funded and if it is really fair that schools in some neighborhoods are able to spend up to ten times as much on their students because of the local tax bracket. The authors concede that until we realize that we are all in

this together and fund schools on a more equal footing across the board, rather than by allowing state and local boards to divide up funds based on taxes, students attending urban schools will continue to be shortchanged. This is especially true, in U.S. contexts, of children of immigration whose families often lack the cultural and political capital to engage change at grassroots level.

In a day and time when education is highly valued by the mainstream and is often touted as the key to achieving the “American dream,” it is disheartening to find that many students are not provided with an adequate opportunity to get a decent education. Although *Our Schools Such* is directed specifically toward U.S. K-12 educators, public educators in other national contexts working with urban learners also experience issues of inequitable funding, overcrowded conditions, and negative representations in the media. I believe that, as a profession, we cannot accept the words of disconnected politicians, journalists, and celebrities and allow school systems to treat students who live in urban poverty as though they are unworthy of our best.

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