Introduction

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In 2003, Jorman Nuñez looked like a troublemaker. At fourteen years old, he should have been learning about American history, performing his first dissection in science class, and tackling algebra. Instead, by March of his freshman year at DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, he began to routinely cut classes. Knowing his mother would be disappointed in him, he stayed clear of his apartment during school hours. Each morning, he dragged himself out of bed by 7:00 and tried to entertain himself outdoors until it was time to go home. He started hanging out with older teenagers and other dropouts. Although they did not engage in illicit activities, they occasionally did stupid things. “We were bored out of our minds,” he said. Jorman remembered one day, for instance, when they hand-slapped a New York Police Department van. The van chased them. They got away that time, but any day now, he felt, he might land himself in big trouble.

At first glance, Jorman’s story corresponds well with a narrative trope that abounds in the popular media these days—that of the wayward, perhaps even thuggish, inner-city youth. It looked as if Jorman was up to no good.

Just two months after Jorman dropped out of school, our nation celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision that outlawed racial segregation in public education. The anniversary prompted a national reflection on the legacy of the ruling
and the state of U.S. schooling. Educators, politicians, civil rights veterans, scholars, and even celebrities weighed in on the impact of Brown. They debated whether the historic case had lived up to its promise to create racially integrated and equal schools, or whether it had instead fallen short of its ambitious goals, particularly in view of the hypersegregated and dramatically unequal conditions in urban school systems around the country.

Since then, however, what started out as a public conversation has turned into a public spanking. At a May 2004 NAACP gala commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Brown, Bill Cosby declared that “lower . . . and lower-middle economic [African American] people are not holding their end in this deal” on education. He asserted that the opportunities were there for the taking and that cultural values and norms explained the academic and economic success or failure of different racial groups. Cosby turned scrutiny away from the role of the courts, the political process, and school systems in perpetuating “still separate and un-equal conditions,” to chastising poor and working-class students of color for their supposed deficient values, lack of motivation, and troubling behavior. “We cannot blame white people,” he proclaimed. “It’s not what they’re doing to us. It’s what we’re not doing. 50 percent drop out.” This finger-pointing was coupled with a convoluted argument that since legal segregation of schools is no longer permitted, the failures of Brown can no longer be a failure of the “system.” Instead, the responsibility for poor achievement in urban schools falls squarely on the shoulders of inner-city young people.

Cosby stumbles over the hard facts, which demonstrate that urban schools of all kinds (i.e., traditional schools, charter schools, magnet programs) are racially segregated and receive fewer resources than suburban school systems. From 1991 to 2004, the percentage of African American students attending majority-nonwhite schools steadily rose from 66 to 73 percent. By that time, 77 percent of Latino students attended majority nonwhite schools. The percentages of African American and Latino students attending intensely segregated schools (with 0–10 percent white students) have also risen since 1991. The flip side of the racial coin holds true as well: only 12 percent of white students attend majority-nonwhite schools.

American schools continue to be plagued not only by racial segregation but also by unequal funding. Although some nonprofit organizations, parent groups, and state governments have attempted to reform school financing structures, the prevailing ethic is one of maintaining status quo inequalities. Local property taxes continue to serve as primary revenue sources for school funding, and the Supreme Court’s 1974 Milliken v.
Bradley decision rules out interdistrict desegregation programs. This provides a striking contrast to school systems in other industrialized nations, where more equitable funding is coordinated at the national level.4

Thus suburban school districts tend to be much better funded than inner-city ones. As Michael Rebell points out, “Students living in school districts with high-priced residential or commercial property [have] continued to have substantially greater resources available to support their education.”5 Linda Darling-Hammond notes that as of 2004, “The wealthiest U.S. public schools spend at least ten times more than the poorest schools—ranging from over $30,000 per pupil at the wealthy schools to only $3,000 at the poorest.”6

Further, funding inequalities are not randomly distributed. Differences between city and suburb exacerbate differences between the schooling of white and nonwhite children, since most suburban schools are predominantly (if not nearly exclusively) white. Gary Orfield and Chungmei Lee explain that because of the ways in which racial and economic inequalities intersect in the United States, “the share of schools that are high poverty increases as minority population increases.”7 Such racial chasms and funding inequalities go hand in hand, even among schools in the same district. A 2003 study of eighty-nine elementary schools in Columbus, Ohio, found that “inequality in spending appears to correspond to the racial and class composition of schools” and that intradistrict per-pupil spending varied from $3,045 to $8,165.8

These funding differences have concrete consequences. For example, students attending California schools where racial minorities constitute the majority are ten times more likely to be instructed by uncertified teachers than students in majority-white schools. In Texas, students attending majority-nonwhite schools are more likely to have teachers with significantly fewer years of education than students at majority-white ones. A 1998 General Accounting Office report found that 67 percent of urban schools had structural problems, compared to only 52 percent of suburban ones.9 Across the nation, high-minority and high-poverty schools have more crowded and physically decaying facilities; fewer qualified teachers; greater turnover in teaching staff and students; larger class sizes; more limited curricula; less challenging classes; lower quality and quantity of instructional materials, equipment, and books; fewer extracurricular activities; and, perhaps not surprisingly, lower achievement scores on standardized exams.10 Thus schools with better funding provide their students with significantly different educational experiences than those schools, often just down the road, with less funding.
The lower levels of academic achievement and higher dropout rates found among segments of African American and Latino children relative to other groups—the so-called “racial achievement gap”—can be fully understood only in the context of an education system that maintains such highly segregated and unequal conditions. Indeed, high dropout rates are concentrated in certain high-poverty and high-minority public schools. A close look at the numbers reveals the questionable and unsavory nature of public discourses and academic literature that place African Americans and Latinos on one side and whites and Asian Americans on the other. (Native Americans are often ignored altogether.) For instance, even though many Asian Americans attend poorly resourced schools, they are subjected to another form of specious culture talk, one that anoints them the “model minority” and groups Cambodian refugees fleeing war atrocities in Long Beach, California, with well-to-do Chinese immigrants whose parents are attending graduate school in Palo Alto. Such essentialist stereotypes detract policy makers from the conditions at hand, dehumanize individual young people, and hinder students who need help—no matter what their racial or ethnic background.

Despite consistent and pervasive inequalities in the American educational system, Bill Cosby contends that inner-city youth have themselves to blame for their academic failure. After his infamous comment at the NAACP gala that “Brown versus the Board of Education is no longer the white person’s problem,” it seemed that every few days yet another high-profile pundit joined the bandwagon, announcing something like “Kids would do better if they just stopped listening to hip-hop” or “The real problem with urban schools is that kids no longer value education and disparage those who do.” For instance, in August 2006, Juan Williams, a Fox News commentator, released Enough: The Phony Leaders, Dead-End Movements, and Culture of Failure That Are Undermining Black America—and What We Can Do about It. In the book, Williams draws heavily on Cosby’s speech and announces that Brown did not fail Black youth; “Young people of color are failing Brown by failing in school or by dropping out.” Just a few weeks later, Bob Herbert of the New York Times joined the “culture of failure” fest, praising Williams and lamenting inner-city blacks who “wallow in the deepest depths of degradation their irresponsible selves can find.” Others shrilled that Latinos, too, were carriers of “the crucible of failure.” A book by Puerto Rican–born congressman Herman Badillo that earned blurbs from both former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani and former New York State governor Mario
Cuomo lamented that “education is not a high priority in the Hispanic community”; it claimed that a five-hundred-year-old “cultural siesta” was the reason Latinos were reporting lower educational levels than “more economically and socially successful immigrant groups.”

Academics moved from sidelines to center stage in lambasting the “culture of failure.” Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson joined the fray by stating that young Black men would rather strike a “cool pose” of thuggery than pursue a meaningful education or seek a job. Berkeley professor John McWhorter began to give fewer academic conference presentations on his field of expertise, the Saramaccan language, and more interviews on the “values” of Black and Latino students, proclaiming that “at Berkeley every third student is Asian. They’re everywhere. . . . They’re obsessed with doing well. . . . There’s no reason for that in the black community, because if you do pretty darn well, you’ll get into a school above and beyond what Suzie Wong could possibly get into. . . . With Latinos as well as black people, there’s a sense that to be white is to be uptight and to sell out.”

These public intellectuals announce that we should not be focusing our attention on socioeconomic or school conditions; what nonwhite youth really need is not a librarian or experienced teachers but a moral flogging. While pundits imply that African American and Latino students choose to drop out because they lack educational values, those who seek to improve the educational performance of young people of color must not only grapple with grim statistics but also investigate what students themselves have to say about their aspirations and the realities of their education. What causal mechanisms do students assign to the racial achievement gap? A recent study, based on extensive surveys and focus groups, suggests that students drop out for a variety of reasons: for instance, 32 percent said that they needed to get a job, and 22 percent said that they needed to care for a family member. Quite a few had high grades before dropping out, and these students stated that their classes had failed to impart skills or interest them.

Contrary to what Cosby et al. insinuate, former students did not dismiss high school as a worthless endeavor. In fact, two-thirds asserted that they would have worked harder if more had been demanded of them.

Our Schools Suck: Students Talk Back to a Segregated Nation on the Failures of Urban Education highlights the voices of our nation’s high school students. It is an intervention into the adult-driven debates on inner-city youth, providing needed voices of love, outrage, challenge, and hope. Gaston, Noel, Jeanne, and I started talking about this book project during the
spring of 2006, when we realized that each of us had independently be-
come alarmed by the absence of youth voices in the public discourse and
the skewed nature of the public conversation around urban education. We
had all spent quite a bit of time with low-income African American and
Latino youth, the very “troublemakers” striking fear and eliciting disgust
among pundits like Juan Williams and Herman Badillo. Somehow, our
observations—which took place over years—never meshed with stereo-
types about inner-city youth as dark menaces to society, shadowy figures
lurking around corners who refused to attend school. Instead, students’
stories simmered with complex analyses of the conditions in which they
lived and the schools in which they tried to learn.

The youth spoke about the nuances of navigating the streets and the
schools of inner cities. Hoping to succeed and make their families proud,
most did not simply succumb to a pernicious “culture of failure.” Indeed,
signs of rebellion did not seem to loom any larger than they would among
any teenage group—Black, Latino, white, or otherwise. Nor did those who
triumphed over their circumstances accomplish this through sheer will
and good parenting but often through the good fortune of encountering
teachers, mentors, or special academic programs that shepherded them
through the troubled schools they were attending.

By paying attention to what the students themselves have to say, this
book serves two purposes. First, it refutes popular depictions of inner cit-
ies as homogenous cauldrons of a “culture of failure,” or of any monolithic
culture. The students’ voices lead us to conclude, not that all urban youth
are secretly angels, but that all of them, from the most successful to the
most marginal students, are complex persons who deserve an excellent
and challenging education. Second, the book demonstrates that to the
extent that students express anger or commit foolish acts, these feelings
and behaviors are largely born out of the conditions in which they live,
work, and attend school rather than essentialized “cool pose” values. In
doing so, it refocuses the public debate onto failed education as one of the
causes, rather than one of the consequences, of the state of urban youth
today.

In the remainder of this chapter, I contrast the popular news media’s
general portrayal of young African American and Latino people as a de-
ographic group with their general portrayal of young white people as
individuals facing specific circumstances. These media portrayals rein-
force Cosby’s thesis that if inner-city students reformed their cultural val-
ues, they would succeed.
I then discuss the approaches we took—the nagging questions we sought to answer and some of the lessons we learned—in each of the remaining chapters in the book. While I am the primary author of this introduction, as Jeanne Theoharis is the primary author of the book’s conclusion, our arguments were developed and are owned by all four coauthors. Throughout, I include snippets of Jorman’s story as a means of highlighting one young person’s voice amid so many adult ones. The passages of poetry sprinkled throughout are all excerpts of spoken-word poems by Jorman.

School didn’t show me what it needed to show,  
And it wouldn’t teach me what I needed to know.  
Bottom line: It didn’t give me the tools I needed to grow.

Troublemaker? Are We Sure?

Did Jorman think staying in school was equivalent to “selling out”? When he dropped out of Clinton High that spring, he had a lot of company. Half of New York City’s ninth-grade public high school students fail to graduate within four years. Some educators fear that the real statistics are even grimmer, as those pushed into GED or alternative certificate programs are often counted as graduates, and the city’s department of education fails to track students who “disappear” between eighth and ninth grades. Sometimes students “disappear” for no reason.

In speaking to the Advocates for Children of New York, Ruby Garcia, also a former student at Clinton High, noted that after she transferred to another school, Clinton High somehow “had no record of me and could not help me. After wasting about a year, I managed to graduate at the top of my class (and on time) at a different school.” Even Ruby Garcia’s brief comment suggests that there is something amiss about Cosby et al.’s “culture of failure” theory. How come Ruby excelled academically as soon as she switched schools? According to her, “Classes [at Clinton High] were too full and teachers seemed more focused on their checks than the product of their teaching.” Approximately 4,600 students attend Clinton High, and there is not a single librarian to serve them.

Students like Jorman do need help. However, it does not then follow, as Cosby intimates, that Jorman failed Brown. What if segregated schools failed Jorman?

Jorman first moved to the United States from the Dominican Republic when he was two years old, alone with his mother. Life in the United
States was difficult, so just a few months after their arrival, he was sent back to be with his grandparents in the Dominican Republic. Around age five, he came back to New York in order to live with his mother, this time for good.

According to Cosby, Jorman should have been one of the immigrants putting African Americans to shame with his work ethic. (After all, as Cosby declared at the NAACP gala, “Everybody knows it’s important to speak English except these [working-class, African American] knuckleheads.”) Yet according to Badillo and McWhorter, Latinos are as vulnerable to the insidious “culture of failure” as African Americans are. The pundits’ conflicting claims show that their blanket caricatures of demographic groups lack nuance and substantive proof. Even as “model immigrant” stereotypes duel with those of Latinos as criminal gang members and social service leeches, Jorman’s case tells a more complex story.

With the help of an ESL (English as a Second Language) class, Jorman learned to read before everyone else in his class. This was partly because his mother, like many immigrant parents, relied on her six-year-old son to act as translator in stores and offices, to read documents and basic instructions on household items, and to teach her English skills. As a result, teachers kept recommending that Jorman be placed in more advanced classes, and upon their recommendations he changed schools three or four times in as many years. By fourth grade, Jorman landed in an advanced program at P.S. 310 in the Bronx. He felt at home there. In sixth grade, he was admitted into AURORA, an advanced program for Latino youth. In addition, he spent most of his time outside class on educational projects of his own. For example, although he never owned a computer, he once came across an obsolete one sitting in the corner of a room in one of his wealthier friends’ apartments. He jumped at the chance to take apart the computer and put it back together to see how it worked. When he watched television, he watched Discovery Channel shows. “I loved that channel. And I loved the fact that I knew the most in class,” he noted. “If someone else got more right answers than me in class, I would go home and look up the answers for the next day. Yeah,” he laughed. “I kind of had a competitive streak in me.” Jorman was on a trajectory for success.

Unfortunately, this fortuitous trend did not last very long. The troubles started in middle school, when Jorman was exposed to a new pedagogical style. In math class, he was not permitted to develop his own algorithms
for problem solving or to deconstruct formulas and put them back together in different ways. Instead, he was told to “solve and check, solve and check” in the manner dictated by the teacher. Jorman was used to being allowed to explore math. Now, he was still scoring 100s on tests, but he sometimes received 70s on his report card. His questions in class constituted “behavioral problems.”

For the first time in his life, Jorman was told to attend summer school. His teachers, even the ones who gave him lower grades for “behavioral problems,” balked. “You shouldn’t be here,” they kept repeating. They would even break the rules and excuse him, telling him that he did not need to show up every day to go over material he had in fact already mastered.

On one hand, Jorman was told that he was too advanced for the classes in which he was placed. On the other hand, he suffered the consequences of being a “delinquent” student with “behavioral problems.” In wealthier school districts, he might have been considered gifted. It is unlikely that Jorman would have been labeled as a “troublemaker” for asking questions in class. These mixed messages surely did not help Jorman find his place in the school system.

Unlike an eighth grader attending Springfield Middle School and assumed to attend Springfield High School, eighth graders in New York City must take a standardized entrance exam to the city’s specialized high schools. Some high schools have minimum required scores; others require application essays and portfolios. Coveted seats at some of the magnet programs without stringent admissions criteria are allotted via lottery. Although the bulk of New York’s high schools have no specific criteria, all students must research, consider, and list up to twelve high schools and specific programs they wish to attend.

After some thought, Jorman came up with a list of schools. His first choice was a selective program at DeWitt Clinton High School, the Macy Honors Gifted Program. This program was known to be academically challenging and to send students to Ivy League and top-tier liberal arts colleges. It offered a variety of Advanced Placement courses, as well as classes in specialized and advanced technology, law, philosophy, the “Great Books,” and other subjects.

If everything had gone along to plan, the city would have gone down Jorman’s list of preferred choices, placing him in the highest-ranked one that both had space in it and accepted his academic record. Jorman was fairly confident that he would end up in the Macy program.
When he got his assigned placement in the mail, however, he opened the document and saw . . . nothing. According to the document, he had no accepted placements and no rejected ones. It was as if he had never handed in a well-considered list—as if he did not exist. Jorman, once anointed a gifted child and precocious thinker by his teachers, would have to fight even to attend high school.

He made phone calls and told city administrators that something had gone terribly wrong with his application. Eventually he found a sympathetic ear, and administrators scrambled to find him a place, any place, in the Bronx. He landed at Clinton High, but no one had bothered to review his high standardized test scores and still impressive academic transcript. He was not placed in the Macy Honors Gifted Program. Nevertheless, Jorman hoped for the best.

He was in for a shock at Clinton High. He distinctly recalls the first day of his ninth-grade math class. He sat in silent horror as the teacher explained concepts he had learned three years before, in the sixth grade. He remembers thinking that surely this was a review. “I’ll get to move on to new math concepts next week, right?” No, he would not.

Jorman began to panic. He went to the guidance counselors’ office. When he arrived, he found three guidance counselors for the school of almost five thousand. The room overflowed with flustered students waiting to see the counselors. Jorman waited but never got to see one. Then he came back the next day and did the same thing.

After several attempts, Jorman got to see a guidance counselor, who reviewed his academic record and confirmed his suspicion that he should not be relearning math concepts from the sixth grade. Jorman asked to be placed in a higher-level class. The counselor stated that if he performed well in the first marking period she would transfer him.

To Jorman, this was suboptimal. Why should he have to lose the chance to attend months of challenging, level-appropriate classes? The counselor herself had stated that he should be transferred. Nevertheless, he agreed to the plan.

At the end of the marking period, Jorman took his report card to the counselor, showed her his good grades, and asked to be transferred. The counselor agreed that he had performed well in his classes but reneged on her promise. He could transfer to his appropriate level the next year.

By this time Jorman was “really frustrated.” He could not imagine eight more months of showing up to classes with content he had learned years ago, and where teachers discouraged critical analysis or active student
participation. Most of his classes took place “in the tower,” where the heat was on way too high throughout the winter. In one room, the windows were always broken, so they could not be opened. (In other rooms, they could not be closed.) The classrooms were supposed to hold twenty students, but they usually held twice that number. Jorman had to race to class to get there in time, and there were often no seats left by the time he arrived. This meant that he would have to sit on the heater in order to take notes on his lap. “I burned my ass off,” he dryly noted.

His other classes were not going well, either. For example, “History should have been engaging and fun.” Jorman liked to debate how history could have transpired differently, how prominent movers and shakers navigated tricky situations, or what social forces or events shaped society. “I wanted challenging teachers,” he declared. “I should have learned something, but it was really, really boring” because his teacher would pass out worksheets and then fall asleep in class.

Jorman muttered, “I cannot remember having fun.” After making this statement, he paused for a moment. “When I said that I couldn’t remember ‘having fun,’ I’m not saying anything about slacking. I mean that I don’t ever remember learning something new.” Besides history, science had been his favorite subject: “I loved it so much that I would spend all my time on it, even outside of class. I have younger twin sisters, and one of my teachers found out, and she told me that if I wanted to be a real scientist, I’d have to sharpen my observation skills. So I remember keeping a journal and logging in everything that they did. What time they were fed, what time they slept, what their moods were like, observing their behavior. I loved it!” Jorman laughed, clearly relishing memories of times when he was truly engaged with school.

Between classes, Jorman struggled to make his way through the crowds and to his next class. This was difficult, as Clinton High was (and is) an egregiously overcrowded school. At the time, the school was already running far beyond the building capacity of 3,363;\(^5\) in 2003 it served 4,524, far outstripping citywide growth in student numbers.\(^6\) Because of this severe overcrowding, the principal relinquished her office to be used for classes, and classes were organized according to three staggered schedules. The thousand or so Macy students, for instance, attended nine class periods each day instead of eight like everyone else in school. The growing presence of themed small schools in the same building added to the confusion. Further, multiple teachers were assigned to any given room. As a result, students could not put work up on the walls, and teachers had to
carry their supplies from room to room. Even with the staggered schedules, hallways looked like rush hour subway trains during class change periods (though at least during rush hour one has the option to wait for a less crowded train).

The presence of armed police exacerbated matters. Between classes, they were constantly blowing their whistles and yelling in the students' ears. Every day, Jorman would feel the police officers' spit against his neck as he stood, shoulder to shoulder, with other students also trying to get to class. “It was tough going from that to boring teachers,” he said. “I didn’t have anything to look forward to.”

Worst of all, Jorman was routinely harassed by the police. As he explained it, “You have to show your ID whenever the police want, and they pick on you. For anything. They always find something. Like me, for example. You see that I’m wearing a hoodie. I know that it’s summer and kind of warm, and it looks funny that I’m wearing a hoodie. But it’s my style! And it wasn’t against the rules.” When they could not think of anything else for which they could pick on Jorman, they would yell, “Take that off! Now! It’s warm out! It’s for your health. TAKE THAT OFF NOW OR I WON’T LET YOU IN!” Jorman complained but nevertheless complied and took off his sweatshirt.

Jorman had a friend who dressed as a goth, wearing lots of black. This friend had multiple piercings on his ears and on his face. The police kept calling him a metal “rack” and laughing, sometimes pushing the friend around as they did so. The friend kept quiet. “See?” the police would mockingly ask Jorman. “Your friend knows how to get pushed around and still stay quiet. You should learn to be more like him.”

Every day Jorman arrived at school on time, only to barely sneak into class late because of the long lines he had to stand in while waiting to be inspected by the police. Every single day, he was harassed as he did so. One of his friends had been maced in the face. Female students regularly complained of inappropriate and humiliating touching and sexual harassment by male officers. Teachers protested the police’s tactics. (At other high schools in the city, teachers and principals had themselves been arrested when they stepped in to protect students.) Occasionally, a police sanction or apology would be issued.

After months of this, Jorman began to lose his passion for school. Still, he is not sure whether he would have left school if the police had not given him the idea to do so. After all, one of their favorite refrains was “You don’t have to be here! Get out of class! Get out of here! You won’t do
anything with your life, anyway! Don’t come back! DON’T COME BACK! GET OUT OF HERE!”

One day, he took their advice and got out of there. Then Jorman started cutting class more often. Finally, by spring of his freshman year, he had dropped out of school completely.

The teachers can’t engage me, so I just sit there, fighting off sleep
And they tell us we’re all different, that our minds are unique at their best
But two minutes later, we suddenly have to take a “standardized” test
They tell me to think critically, “Don’t just follow the mass”
But if I ask a challenging question, I get kicked out of class
And when I got my hat on, it shows that the discipline rules are not fair
’Cause Ms. O’Neill lets me slide, but Mr. Martinez suspends me right there
Screaming in my face so much, I could see his drool
He tells me delinquents like me shouldn’t bother with school
But my mother tells me different, she wants me to obtain knowledge
She tells me to fulfill my dreams, be the first to reach college
I thought I was competent, I always thought I was smart
But these mixed messages have torn me apart.

The View Is So Much Prettier at the Top

Jorman’s story highlights the disconnect between the prevailing public discourse on the lack of values among inner-city youth and the infinitely more complex realities these teenagers face. Somehow, the accounts of dropouts like Jorman rarely enter public discourse about them. Public declarations like those by Williams or Badillo are not neutral presentations of facts or motivational truth telling but polemics with captive audiences and dire consequences.

It is striking that the most prominent “culture of failure” pundits all happen to be Black or Latino men. Even as they claim to be the ultimate seers and spokesmen for the larger Black and Latino communities, there is an irony to this brand of tough love. In the intersection of class and race, these Black and Latino middle- and upper-class men elevate themselves while denigrating those “who are at the bottom” of the socioeconomic hierarchy. In so doing, they do not necessarily acknowledge existing inequalities in our schools, but they do help to maintain their own fragile mainstream acceptence and social sanction. Their sermons act like a magic password, one that allows them to join a private club of the elite.
By deflecting attention from the socioeconomic conditions in which students live and attend school, these “tough love” advocates diagnose the young as producers of their own disease. Their discourse may reflect a real and prominent split within communities of color, where leaders and everyday citizens legitimately engage in debates on what urban education policy should look like. However, in the larger national political context, it exacerbates binary “good versus criminal” conceptualizations of Blacks and Latinos. It renders inner-city youth a “not like us” alien species, one that does not quite have the same common sense, moral fiber, and mental faculties we do. That these aliens are resident ones does not render them any less foreign or inferior.

The prevailing discourse also helps policy makers keep racial and socioeconomic hierarchies intact. White Americans, who are more likely to fall at higher points along these hierarchies, are subject to an entirely different set of stereotypes. “Hip-hop, professional basketball and homeboy fashions are as American as cherry pie,” Orlando Patterson intones in the New York Times. “Young white Americans are very much into these things, but selectively; they know when it is time to turn off Fifty Cent and get out the SAT prep book.”

Given such specious, sweeping characterizations, it is hard to imagine “cool pose” critiques sticking to wealthier, whiter, suburban counterparts, even if students in neighboring Scarsdale also regularly mess up. When stashes of alcohol in white stretch limousines are considered a traditional part of their prom night experience, policy makers do not suddenly deem these teenagers unworthy of a decent, and expensive, educational system. When eight students in suburban Montrose broke onto school grounds and planted covered clocks that were taken to be bombs, a New York Times columnist urged that administrators loosen up a little and let the “punishment fit the prank.” When high school seniors at elite New York City schools drank to excess on all-expenses-paid trips to the Caribbean over spring break, schools and parents responded not by taking privileges away but by making trips safer. These parents took time off from work to go to the Caribbean as well, staying at adjacent resorts, so that they could be there to fix things at a moment’s notice, just in case.

An important pattern emerges in the popular media’s treatment of wealthier, white students. They are often quoted directly, and frequently at length. For instance, “Amazing +” profiled “perfect” female students at
a public high school in Newton, Massachusetts, where the median house price in 2006 was $730,000. The most e-mailed article on the New York Times Web site for several weeks in April 2007, it featured the personal narratives and college application essays of Colby, Esther, and other “pretty, thin” girls who “are high achieving, ambitious, and confident. . . . [who] grew up learning they can do anything . . . they want to do.” Although these students know how to be “good consumer(s)” with their own credit cards, don “cute lingerie” under the “latest North Face jacket,” and reveal “expertise in designer jeans,” they are not portrayed as morally bankrupt. When one of them struggled in school, this was not automatically seen as a reflection of her own shortcomings. Instead, her mother responded with, “Who gave you a B? I’m going to talk to them.”

Indeed, the article focused on the pressures these young women faced to excel in school and still be popular and pretty—sympathetic to the balancing act they attempted and the flawed ways in which they sometimes handled it. With such fine-grained stories describing their views and struggles, it is easy for readers to see such young people as rebels with a cause. Those who buck the system are seen as insightful social critics rather than nihilistic troublemakers.

Even among youth accused of committing serious crimes, white teenagers are more likely to be pictured in a school instead of a criminal justice setting, to be quoted, to have their defense lawyer quoted, to have their family members quoted, and to be interviewed for biographical information such as their hobbies, aspirations, and concerns. They are also rarely identified in explicitly racial terms. These young people are not reduced to statistics or quick generalizations.

By contrast, a meta-analysis of an entire decade’s worth of studies on the media demonstrates that, viewed against actual crime rates, articles and editorials on crimes consistently overrepresent racial minorities as perpetrators and underrepresent them as victims. One study reported that although 80 percent of homicide victims in the Los Angeles area were African American or Latino, white victims were three times more likely to receive coverage in the Los Angeles Times.

Just as they play a role in portraying white teenagers as well-rounded individuals, media outlets play a role in perpetuating stereotypes of Black and Latino inner-city youth as criminals. Although homicide rates decreased by 20 percent between 1992 and 1997, news coverage of youth homicides, especially in urban areas, on ABC, NBC, and CBS evening
broadcasts increased by 721 percent over the same period. Partly because of this, even as the FBI and U.S. Department of Justice report a 33 percent decline in juvenile violence since 1994, two-thirds of Americans believe that youth crime is rising. According to polls, 82 percent of Americans admit that their perceptions of crime are based not on personal experiences but on the news.37

Without background stories as rich as those featuring the “Amazing +” girls, news reports lead to public misunderstanding not only of youth crime rates but also of their cause. Often nonwhite teenagers are portrayed not as individuals responding (in a whole range of positive and negative ways) to severe circumstances but as stereotypes of depravity. John Dilulio, then a Princeton professor and later the George W. Bush administration’s first director of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, put forth the “juvenile superpredator” theory in the early 1990s.38 By 1998, former New York governor George Pataki declared that “the root causes of crime are the criminals who engage in it. And I’ve repeatedly made that point to the Legislature.”39

It does not take long for hype to mutate into law. In the very same speech, Pataki urged that parole be abolished for all violent offenders, that multiple drug-related misdemeanors be charged as felonies, and that the death penalty be made easier to impose. Between 1992 and 1997, forty-seven states enacted laws allowing youth to be transferred from juvenile to criminal justice systems.40 Nationwide, it has become more difficult for juvenile offenders, even so-called “status offenders” who are arrested for infractions such as running away from home, to seek help in public institutions rather than private prisons.41 Some polls show that two-thirds of Americans believe that youth under the age of thirteen accused of murder should be tried as adults.42 Some politicians have introduced legislation to apply the death penalty to children as young as eleven. As Henry Giroux writes, “The poor white, black, and brown kids at whom such laws are aimed do not live in a world in which the most serious problems they have to face include being asked to perform excessive school work. On the contrary, these kids live with the daily fear of being incarcerated and the ongoing experience of not having enough food to eat, proper housing, and medical care.”43 The stakes are highest for those with the least resources. Black youth with no prior record are six times more likely to be incarcerated than white defendants with similar backgrounds and the equivalent criminal charges.44 These youth have little means to hire expensive counsel or to ask for psychiatric help or remediation.
The menacing line that “criminals cause crime” is a bit simplistic, and Pataki himself acknowledged this when he boldly stated that he was “not charged with carrying out a sociological study.”

That might be because study after study demonstrates that delinquency, violence, depression, and high-risk behavior are strongly correlated with neighborhood, especially among teenagers. Why do these behavioral responses tend to be clustered in neighborhoods? When individual-level characteristics are held constant or put aside, the actual primary culprits of high-crime neighborhoods—namely concentrated economic disadvantage and residential instability—become even easier to discern.

Nevertheless, Cosby has focused on poor values, rather than concentrated poverty or lack of socioeconomic mobility, as the primary cause of high incarceration rates in the African American community: “Looking at the incarcerated, these are not political criminals. . . . People getting shot in the back of the head over a piece of pound cake! Then we all run out and are outraged. ‘The cops shouldn’t have shot him.’ What the hell was he doing with the pound cake in his hand? I wanted a piece of pound cake just as bad . . . [but] something called parenting said [that] if you get caught with it, you’re going to embarrass your mother.” Cosby suggests that in the pre–civil rights days of his childhood, parents instilled a set of moral values in youth that prevented them from acting in dysfunctional ways. He received widespread praise for implying that today fewer crimes would be committed if mothers reprimanded their children more. Such declarations detract the public’s attention from the conditions in which teenagers like Jorman live. Indeed, these rebukes echo those of Pataki, even if Cosby chastises parents as well as the teenagers themselves.

Cosby’s remarks also feed the popular perception that dropout rates in the inner cities do not partly stem from societal factors or root causes but instead result entirely from personal choices. Policy makers then forward legislative bills for more surveillance and armed police in schools, even as the budgets for teachers, books, and classroom space continue to stagnate or dwindle. In these ways, how we are talked about becomes how we are treated.

If you were told that schools are equal then you were told the best lie
Because we have more stereotypes in our schools than Best Buy.

..............
We are not born criminals, we are created
We represent the youth destined to be incarcerated.
Jorman Sets New Goals

When Jorman dropped out of school, no one in his family found out for four months. How had Jorman gotten away with fooling them for so long? Well, despite Bush Sr.'s statement that "dollar bills don't educate students," Clinton High could have made good use of some. The calling system notifying parents of students' absences had stopped working long before. According to an administrator, it was "overwhelmed by the volume of calls because of the huge enrollment."

What about Jorman's parents? Had they been paying attention? Why, yes. But when his mother and stepdad asked to see his grades, he put his computer skills to use, scanned real report cards, and generated incredibly well-crafted fake ones. Jorman spent his mornings hanging out with friends. In the afternoons, he went to the offices of a youth organizing group he had recently joined, Sistas and Brothas United (SBU). SBU worked with high school students on campaigns aimed at improving conditions in Bronx, especially in terms of alleviating overcrowding, improving teacher quality, and reducing police harassment.

Once the school year ended, Jorman spent more time at the SBU offices. He learned that many other students, at other Bronx high schools, also struggled in their classes. While not all of them excelled academically, and there was a wide range of reasons for this, lack of thirst for knowledge did not seem to be one. After all, they eagerly conducted research, attended and ran workshops, and worked on draft after draft of vision statements for campaigns. Jorman began to feel close to his peers and the organizers at SBU.

Finally, toward the end of the summer, he came clean. He told the organizers at SBU that he had dropped out of school. He was afraid of their reaction; he had heard that students who did not do well in school would not be allowed to continue working on SBU campaigns, which focused on school reform. But the way SBU organizers reacted caught Jorman off guard. They were disappointed in him, but they did not yell at him. Nor did they tell him that he could no longer participate in SBU. Instead, they said, "Whatever you want to do, we'll help you with."

Jorman had three major goals for the next year. He wanted to "read about youth movements and social movements in general, mess around with computers, and expand my vocabulary and improve my speaking and writing skills." He came to this last goal after attending school reform conferences around the country with SBU. "I had things to say, but they
didn’t come out the way it did when the other organizers—mostly older, white—talked. They could articulate their missions and what they were doing in a way I couldn’t, even if I had similar thoughts. I decided that I needed to expand my vocabulary.”

Jorman worked toward his three goals with the help of a former teacher and educator at SBU. He also regularly wrote spoken-word poems, like the ones sprinkled throughout this chapter, for rallies. (He looked embarrassed when I mentioned that I might include them in this introduction, however, because he constructs them as rhymes to be heard and to fulfill a very different purpose than written poetry.) It was during that year, 2004, that he realized that it was still possible for him to learn every day. He decided, “I want to go to college. I need to go to college. And in order to go to college, I’m going to have get through high school. I made that decision on my own.”

Through a friend at SBU, Jorman found out about a program called CUNY Prep. The City University of New York program helps at-risk students to take challenging, college preparatory classes and acquire a GED. Jorman was deemed too young to be eligible. After turning sixteen, however, Jorman applied and was admitted. Once at CUNY Prep, he thrived. “The teachers were open to the students’ opinions and super strict on me. The classes were really hard, but the teachers were down-to-earth and understood where I came from.” As he described that year, Jorman became more animated: “You know what I especially liked? They were not condescending. And there was a cool school safety agent! The agent was there to help people! I didn’t know that was possible!”

Jorman remembered that during his entire time at Clinton High he had seen the principal only once. At CUNY Prep, the principal greeted the students every day. To Jorman, that indicated that “he wanted to be with us. Hate him or like him, I knew he was there for me.”

Under these circumstances, he rose to the top of his class and graduated with a GED in one year. He was ready for college. Jorman needed to stay in the city, where he had been living on his own and working as a community organizer, and could not pay high tuition costs. He chose Hunter College, within the CUNY system, because it was a reasonable commute away and featured strong political science and urban studies programs. He had visited the campus before, as a speaker on various panels about youth social movements or school reform, and Hunter College professors had encouraged him to apply.

In 2006, at the age of seventeen, Jorman became a Hunter College student. He loved it from the beginning. During his first semester, his
favorite class was in political theory. For the class, he read Plato, Hobbes, Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Patricia Williams. At first, Jorman’s favorite in the class was Nietzsche, but now he looks back at this with chagrin. “It might be kind of contradictory to my work for social justice,” he said sheepishly. “Then my favorite was Foucault. When I read his description of the Panopticon, I thought, ‘Wow, this guy is really onto something.’”

They tell me there’s no money for schools, but I think they’re telling me tales
’Cause Bloomberg funded our [surveillance] cameras, and they always got money for jails.
See what they fund schools with, and then times that by more than three
You’ll still get less than half of what they fund prisons—Huh! Wonder where they want me to be.

Highlighting the Voices of Students on Their Own Education

It might be expected that media sound bites about anyone, let alone inner-city youth, would not offer full, complex portrayals of reality. Nevertheless, it is surprising to note just how pervasive and off-base many of the one-dimensional characterizations are and how far they go in shaping ill-informed public policy.

This book is borne out by the real-life experiences of inner-city students. Instead of presenting facile sound bites about “hip-hop” or “bling,” it tells of students’ persistent frustrations about inoperable school bathrooms and dirty homeless shelters at the end of the day; their awe at “beautiful” trailer parks and classes where they “really learned”; their complaints about being treated like “aliens” and “fxxx-up[s]” (written as if we needed to be protected from their coarse language); their self-flagellation over their inability to do better in school, even when assignments provided no meaningful lessons; and their fear of peer ridicule, not for “acting white,” but for not being “smart” enough to read out loud in history class.

In response to these conditions, many students nonetheless held deep-seated beliefs, a religious faith even, in the promise of education to make them better people and to help them (and their families) move up in American society. Some students internalized stereotypes about their demographic group’s moral failings. They, too, doubted whether they worked
hard enough, even as they articulated the ways in which their efforts felt futile, given the few opportunities available to them. To the extent that these teenagers are sometimes ambivalent about school, they resemble other teenagers around the nation.

The following sections introduce the plan of the book, the ways in which *Our Schools Suck* traces the origins and the evolution of the “culture of failure” thesis in the social science literature and popular media, and what young people have to say in response. Foremost, they insist on their right to criticize aspects of their schooling—and for that to be seen as a measure not of their attitudes or determination to achieve but of the quality of their schooling itself.

What's Old Is New Again

In chapter 1 Gaston Alonso observes that the notion that African Americans are immersed in a drug- and crime-infested “culture of failure” is, in fact, just the latest riff off an old theme. The theme's lineage includes 1960s discussions of “the tangle of pathology” afflicting the “Negro family,” early twentieth-century eugenicist tracts regarding the inferiority of the “Negro race,” post-Reconstruction hysteria regarding the “sexual menace” posed by Black men, pre−Civil War cartoons and songs depicting free Blacks as dysfunctional “Zip Coons,” and seventeenth-century associations in the European mind of “blackness” with savagery and violence.52

Pertinent to the consequences of the old-theme-in-new-clothing “culture of failure” thesis and its academic variations is James Baldwin's observation that popular representations of African Americans, and the myths we create about them, have historically allowed us to “victimize, as we do, children whose only crime is color and keep them, as we put it, in their place.” According to Baldwin, their “place” was the material and symbolic “bottom” of American society. There, they are taken by other Americans as a touchstone against which they can measure their own social status. “In a way,” Baldwin noted, “the Negro tells us where the bottom is: because he is there, and where he is, beneath us, we know where the limits are and how far we must not fall. We must not fall beneath him.”53

The historical precedents of contemporary popular and academic characterizations of people of color are thus clear. However, the validity of those characterizations, and of the theoretical frameworks they serve, are less so. Gaston questions not just the validity of popular representations of urban teenagers but also the ways public intellectuals, journalists, and
fellow academics have framed their discussions regarding the school performance of these youth.

Chapter 1 explores three strands of scholarship that have influenced current debates surrounding the “culture of failure” thesis: first, scholarship on the “cool pose” and “street culture” of inner-city residents and, for some, of African Americans and Latinos in general; second, scholarship on the “oppositional cultural identities” and the fear of “acting white” supposedly held by African American and Latino students; and third, “segmented assimilation” scholarship on how second-generation children who embrace the “oppositional outlooks” of urban youth risk being dragged down the social ladder with them.

Gaston argues that despite the much-heralded post-1960s “structural turn” in the social sciences, much of this scholarship remains trapped in the culturalist assumptions of earlier “culture of poverty” studies. Many of the authors depict the supposed dysfunctional norms and behaviors of African Americans and Latinos as “adaptations” to structural conditions found in the inner city but tend to give greater causal weight to cultural norms than to preceding structural conditions. Cultural norms thus become the fundamental emblem of the figurative “heart of darkness” of the inner city.

How many times are controversial academic hypotheses passed on, from person to person, before they are taken as fact? Chapter 1 suggests that the answer is disturbingly small. The questionable link between “cultural values” and educational performance is assumed to be not only strong but causal. The chapter traces how such hypotheses travel from the academic literature into the pages of national newspapers and best-selling books and how, in the process, historical representations of people of color as backward and inferior are given a new life and sold like hotcakes.

As a consequence of all this culture talk, the policy proposals with the most political traction are those that attempt to address the supposed cultural deficits of inner-city children and/or families rather than the real-life conditions plaguing schools in inner cities, those repeatedly highlighted by the students whose voices are heard in this book. Thus the chapter also articulates the ways in which current educational policies and trends, such as high-stakes testing and Bush’s No Child Left Behind legislation, build upon characterizations of urban youth as pathological and anti-intellectual. As long as urban youth would rather strike a “cool pose” than study, the rationale goes, it is not incumbent on the government to provide them with a meaningful, challenging education.
If They Don’t Care, Then We’re Not Letting Them Down, Right?

The student journals in chapter 2 come from a class Jeanne Theoharis co-taught with Steve Lang, an African American veteran teacher at Fremont High School in South Los Angeles. Lang allowed Jeanne to co-teach his junior-level history classes twice a week during the 2003–4 school year, focusing on supplementing their regular American history lessons with additional material focused on African American and Latino history.

At first, Jeanne, used to midwestern winters and the tight spaces of Northeast cities, marveled at the fact that these students got to eat outside for lunch, on the courtyard and in the sun, every day. School looked so pleasant. It therefore took her weeks to realize that her first impression of carefree, pleasurable school conditions had been misleading. For one thing, lunch outside meant that there was not enough room inside. With only one half hour for lunch, many students did not make it through the lunch line. Further, students were not allowed to go to bathrooms or relieve themselves during lunch—or during class. The school sometimes had only one operable girls’ bathroom. The bathroom problem constituted just one small detail among the many deplorable conditions the students faced every day. And the eight-hour school day left Jeanne mind-numbingly tired and overwhelmed. How adolescents could intellectually survive such a day was unclear to Jeanne.

In class, Jeanne encouraged the students to tell their own stories—to analyze the grand project of History with a capital “H” and to think about who gets to write the more familiar parts. Jeanne took pains to include in the case study presented in chapter 2 the wide range of students’ writings about their own schooling. She did not want readers to dismiss a few highlighted students as somehow anomalous, representatives of some sort of “minority exceptionalism.” These teenagers, the very ones scraping by in school and derided by Cosby for “fighting hard to be ignorant,” wrote about what they had done over the weekend, what music they loved, and whom they had crushes on. Without any prompting or any instructions, however, they also spent quite a bit of ink considering and astutely analyzing their schooling, imagining what they wanted for the future, and gauging their chances for socioeconomic mobility.

That even these students—a broad range of teenagers, including the ones assigned to a veteran teacher like Steve because they were viewed as troublemakers, the ones urinating outside on the sides of the school walls (because the bathrooms were not open)—argued to themselves and
the world, again and again, that they wanted to prove people wrong about what they could do and about how badly they wanted to succeed should sound comforting. Heartwarming even. The ultimate effect, however, is one of troubling discomfort. If such students do care deeply about school, then how can we as a society allow poor schools like Fremont to carry on the status quo? Entranced by visions of dysfunction and criminality, we have found it all too easy to ignore the educational inequities that still flourish in this country. The focus on “poor values,” then, seems more revealing of us as a society than of the character of young people. Most of these students believed in the power of education and the value of hard work, and they were quick to blame themselves, and often only themselves, when they did not succeed. How can we as adults insist that young people be held responsible for their educational outcomes when we have not demonstrated an equal level of responsibility toward them and their educational well-being?

Disbelief among the Believers

Noel Anderson’s chapter highlights four of the African American and Latino high school students who, also during the 2003–4 school year, spoke extensively with him about navigating school and neighborhood conditions, financial and social pressures, and sometimes conflicting responsibilities. As young men in a selective New York City Upward Bound program, these students had to maintain high grades, write successful application essays, and balance their studies with family responsibilities, after-school jobs, and the Upward Bound program. They were purportedly among “the chosen,” those on the track to success. Nevertheless, the details of their lives varied considerably, and the extent of the dangers they faced—attacks by gang members or bullies, eviction from their apartments if they did not quickly find a new job and help their families pay rent—sometimes astounded Noel.

One of the most salient themes for the interviewees was the large disconnect between what they wanted to achieve and what reality allowed them to accomplish. This disconnect occurred on many levels: some of the teenagers complained that the Upward Bound program, as well intentioned as it was, did not help them to help their families financially, ensure that they could afford college if they got in, get home safely, and avoid trouble. Others talked about the divide between their aspirations and the opportunities available. Those who needed to find after-school jobs were
often unable to do so; they found that they had to compete against much older men for low-skilled jobs.

The teenagers also pinpointed ways in which their realities belied assumptions made about them in the media—and, in the end, by their neighbors, families, and themselves as well. One student spoke about being followed in the stores in which he shopped and about how this made him “feel guilty,” even though he had done nothing wrong. As young Black and Latino young men, these star students were often treated as suspected criminals in their after-school jobs. They were often hired to execute special surveillance on their demographic peers. Despite living in an urban center with a small employment base for low-skilled young workers, attending under-resourced schools, and facing discrimination in their job searches, they were repeatedly told that success rested on their motivation.

The students’ narratives were also strikingly similar to those in the student journals Jeanne describes in chapter 2. While these teenagers strove to succeed academically, they too expressed deep misgivings about the education they were receiving. One student said that he easily scored well in his English class, as he knew what the teacher wanted to read, but that he was not learning anything there. Like Jorman, this young man had developed a much more sophisticated analysis of teaching and learning than students like him are usually given credit for. When inner-city youth critique schools or when some complain that “our schools suck,” proponents of the “culture of failure” thesis assume that the students’ observations reflect a lack of values. In reality, many of these students are the clear-eyed truth tellers, those who are genuinely, deeply invested in our nation’s public schools, have ideas for school reform, and pine for the opportunities and resources to do something about it.

Chapter 3 speaks to the sweeping assumptions that Black and Latino young men are sabotaging their education and subsequent employability by embracing a “culture of failure.” As Noel listened to the students’ stories, he came to grasp the ways in which these popular explanations ignored the political economy in which the students were attempting to study and work. Such discourse made them feel as if perseverance would grant them success when, in fact, they also needed physical protection, decent schools, and after-school jobs. He also concluded that the literature gave them little credit for their resilience, critical analysis, and creativity, especially in the ways in which they navigated tough situations and harsh conditions.
Speaking Truth to Deaf Power

In 2003–4 I spent a lot of time with several education organizing groups in the Bronx, studying the ways in which they encouraged the broad participation of everyday citizens, rather than elected representatives, in policy making. The groups I examined all aim to make the public school system more accountable to parents and students by forwarding policy proposals and engaging elected officials and civil servants through organized meetings, petitions, rallies, and protests. One of my case studies was SBU.55

The SBU leaders I present in chapter 4 were unabashedly activist and spoke of school reform as a vocation, not just a pragmatic goal. Partly because of this, I had thought that the SBU leadership might suffer from severe self-selection and “creaming,” such that only the best students would show up and stay. What surprised me was that young people did not arrive at SBU as overachieving do-gooders; some excelled in school, but others were barely passing their classes, were failing in them, or, like Jorman, had dropped out of school altogether. I doubt that the SBU leaders are completely representative, as some members dropped out when they had to regularly baby-sit younger siblings, for instance. Still, I could not discern any specific patterns of bias except for one: most SBU leaders were recruited by peers, so those who were isolated in school were unlikely to join. As I listened to their stories, I came to understand that many came to SBU because it was a good place to hang out after school or because their friends had urged them to do so.

I learned that overall these leaders’ testimonies reflected processes of personal transformation and empowerment, not self-selection. As teenagers became familiar with SBU’s campaigns, they learned the statistical and political tools to better contextualize their educational experiences. They learned to read financing memos, scour School Construction Authority documents, and analyze high school building capacities and occupancy rates in order to craft their own proposals. As they engaged in meaningful political campaigns, research projects, and workshops, these teenagers thrived. It became obvious that those who had not always spoken this eloquently about school reform had always cared but had not had the opportunities or skills to express themselves before. They recalled dozens of incidents in which they had been demoralized by their abysmal school conditions, even in primary school. The difference was that now they were connecting the dots as they did so.
Just the fact that SBU existed, and that dozens of inner-city youth showed up to volunteer on campaigns each afternoon, upended stereotypes about these teenagers as disdainful of school. Nevertheless, they faced a constant, uphill battle in trying to get policy makers to pay attention. Again and again, the SBU leaders came face to face with adults who were well-meaning and claimed to care about social justice but who nevertheless refused to meet with the students or who dismissed the youth’s critiques as insolent rather than constructive. Jorman stated that in such situations, he sometimes cautiously says, “I’m not trying to discredit your viewpoint. It’s valid. But when it comes down to it, social justice for you is a hobby. For me, it’s my life. For you, it’s a good idea. For me, it’s survival. I have a stake in these campaigns. If they don’t work out for you, you have the privilege to go somewhere else.” These days, Jorman continues to attend Hunter College full time, work full time, and work on social justice campaigns, both at SBU and on his own.

As compared to the student narratives highlighted by Jeanne and Noel, those from SBU are more uplifting. What accounts for the difference? Is it that SBU leaders valued education more? Cosby’s “culture of failure” thesis is partly appealing because it assigns agency to individuals living in inner cities; it says that by caring more as parents and students they will succeed. Indeed, Jorman is a gifted student, and his determination surely helped, but he also needed something to meet his determination partway. For SBU leaders, realizing one’s agency requires articulating and naming injustices and visualizing something different.

We want good schools, with a whole lotta class
So that mommy can brag, & we can surpass
the myth—to be leaders at last.

A Growing Chorus for a New Commonsense Vision of Public Education

The student voices in this book are not random or isolated. They bring to life the statistics about segregated communities, overcrowded classrooms, and low rates of educational achievement. By paying attention to what students have to say about their own education, we make it much more difficult for policy makers to ignore them, for two reasons. First, the American public can no longer dismiss these teenagers as thugs and whores or distance themselves from those “Other” people who live in the “dangerous inner cities.” Second, the American public can and must
make its policy makers accountable. As students attest, there are systemic problems in their inner-city schools, and these problems call for systemic solutions.

Together, these chapters are about more than eleventh graders at Fremont High School in Los Angeles, students in a New York City Upward Bound program, or activist leaders in SBU in the Bronx. After all, the case study settings of South Central Los Angeles, Harlem, and the Bronx loom large in the American public’s imagination as iconic ghettos, often associated with images such as the Los Angeles unrest of 1992 or declarations like “The Bronx is burning.” Los Angeles and New York City also constitute the nation’s two largest cities and school districts, together serving almost two million students each year. Further, the Los Angeles and New York public school systems are currently seen as laboratories of innovation and reform, trailblazers of mayoral control of schools, and immigrant gateways to the so-called Great Equalizer of American opportunity. For all these reasons, what happens in these neighborhoods may not be representative, but it nevertheless affects the way in which local, state, and national education policies are framed and evaluated.

When Gaston, Noel, Jeanne, and I talked about the case studies, we noticed that they coalesced around common themes: the drive to do well under dreadful circumstances at school, the disconnect between school curricula and the real-life socioeconomic conditions students witnessed, and the difficulties youth faced in their attempts to empower themselves and to make a difference in their own schooling. Despite, or perhaps because of, the differences in our research methods and case study locations, the fact that the students all spoke of the importance of education is astounding. Sometimes, as Gertrude Stein said, “repetition in human expression” is “not repetition, but insistence.” Many of these students continuously and collectively insisted that they needed help and want a shot at a decent, meaningful education.

Of course, there are limitations in foregrounding young people’s perspectives. These teenagers have not yet had the chance to “find themselves” in college or trips abroad, nor are most of them privileged enough to ever do so. Nevertheless, some of them are precocious, and some have already begun to analyze how their lives fit into larger social and historical trends. Further, in the debate on what inner-city youth really care about and want, it behooves us to ask them. As Gaston argues in this book’s methodological appendix, young people have the authority and right to speak as the ultimate stakeholders in their own education. The
contradictions, conflicts, and doubts they express are largely testaments to the complex circumstances in which they live and to their analyses of these conditions.

Drawing on students’ insights, Jeanne formally presents our policy recommendations in the Conclusion. Her analysis centers on the policy issues that students raised the most: how their bodily experience of school is influenced by the quantity and quality of resources available in classrooms and the governance and organizational structures of their schools. Meanwhile, many of the most popular recent reforms—No Child Left Behind, mayoral control, and high-stakes testing—make students liable for their academic performance in standardized exams but fail to hold public officials and the government responsible for democratic accountability and adequate resources.

If we were to treat them like wealthy, mostly suburban teenagers (like those profiled in newspaper articles mentioned earlier in the Introduction), then inner-city youth would not have to constantly demonstrate to us that they deserve a decent education. They would just get it. These teenagers are like other teenagers; many are troublemakers, and many want to do well by their families and teachers, and for the most part, they do. Besides, what teenager faces no moral dilemmas or feels no sense of rebellion or alienation? These struggles are quintessential to American adolescence. In other settings, jaded comments render a teenager mature and introspective, the one who sees through all the plastic fakery of cheerleader-driven and materialistic Americana and eventually succeeds as the sensitive poet or screenwriter. Absurd as that stereotype sounds, an equally one-dimensional stereotype about the disillusioned kid in the inner city renders him or her as uncaring rather than sensitive, stupid rather than insightful, and undeserving of even a basic decent education rather than worthy of second chances.

Yet when it comes to specious stereotypes about youth in the inner city, so-called “experts” feel free to use them to build official public policy. The American public, and the policy makers who represent us, focus on how we struggle to put food on our tables, save up for homes in decent school districts, and pay taxes so that our children can take the classes necessary to get into good colleges. In other words, we will work for what is rightfully ours. But might such opportunities be rightfully those of all Americans? As long as we believe that those people do not particularly value education or make use of their schools, we will believe that our tax dollars should not be “wasted” on their kids.
Two recent court cases in particular, *Williams v. State of California* and *Campaign for Fiscal Equity v. State of New York*, highlight both the errors of current approaches and the efforts of continued movements, led by young people and their allies, toward an equal and excellent education for everyone. By examining these cases, Jeanne brings the discussion back full circle by reminding us that *Brown v. Board of Education* was about not just racial integration but equity. Thus the students’ analyses of structural conditions presented in this book are not exercises in nihilism but quite the opposite: they are hopeful, substantive rallying cries for policy makers to listen to and partner with young people in school reform.

With help, urban youth can articulate what their aspirations are and what they need to succeed. For all the confusion about what to do with urban schools, policy makers seem to have ignored the best scientific proof out there: experimental design studies (where students with similar demographic backgrounds are randomly assigned to “control” classroom settings or to “experimental” ones with interventions) show that small classes, decent school services, and preschool programs have statistically significant and permanent effects on all major well-being outcomes: high school graduation, grades, crime reduction, even life expectancy. Yet unquestioned, commonsense conditions in wealthier school districts are targeted as “unproven” and “wasteful” when implemented in poorer, primarily urban, districts—even when they are exactly what young people ask for. After all, students have ideas about what pedagogical styles work, where resources are really needed, and where bullies hang out. As one young woman, a member of the New York City–wide Urban Youth Collaborative, declared in a meeting with Department of Education officials: “Please. You keep staring at your piece of paper and referring to questionable ‘data.’ Please look up and listen to us. We’re sitting in front of you. We are the data.”