

# The Odd Couple

*Murray and Rothstein find some unexpected common ground*

Checked:

Charles Murray, "Intelligence in the Classroom," *Wall Street Journal*, January 16, 2007

Richard Rothstein, *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap* (*Economic Policy Institute*, 2004)

Checked by Jay P. Greene

Welfare critic and American Enterprise Institute fellow Charles Murray and former union organizer and *New York Times* columnist Richard Rothstein don't usually have much in common. But one thing on which they agree is that there is little that schools can do to improve educational achievement, particularly for poor and minority students. Both Murray and Rothstein contend that schools face severe constraints that hinder their ability to alter student outcomes. The net effect of their arguments is to provide aid and comfort to those who would resign themselves to the educational status quo and explain away the school system's shortcomings.

## The Argument against Reform

While both Murray and Rothstein argue that schools are operating under severe constraints, they disagree about what those constraints are. According to Murray, in a recent commentary in the *Wall Street Journal* and his controversial book, *The Bell Curve*, the major factor hindering school improvement is the cognitive

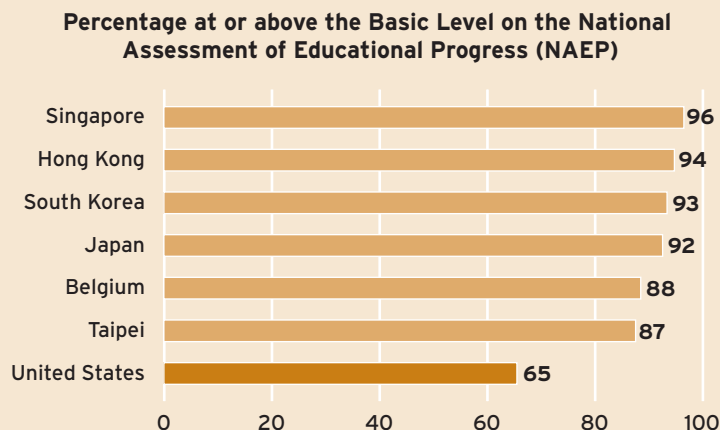


potential of students. No matter how hard they try, Murray argues, schools cannot get students to achieve more than their intelligence will allow. As he puts it, "Our ability to improve the academic accomplishment of students in the lower half of the distribution of intelligence is severely limited. It is a matter of ceilings."

According to Rothstein, in his book *Class and Schools*, the major factor hindering school improvement is poverty and its attendant social ills. Rothstein argues that "the influence of social class characteristics is probably so powerful that schools cannot overcome it, no matter how well trained are their teachers and no matter how well designed are

## Room to Improve (Figure 1)

*Top-scoring countries are much closer to having all their students reach or surpass a basic level of achievement in 8th-grade math than is the U.S.*



Note: For countries other than the U.S., percentages have been estimated by linking the NAEP to student performance on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).

SOURCE: Gary W. Phillips, "Linking NAEP Achievement Levels to TIMSS," American Institutes for Research, 2007

their instructional programs and climates." It is only a slight exaggeration to say that Rothstein views demography as destiny, at least in the aggregate. In his words, "No matter how competent the teacher, the academic achievement of lower-class children will, on average, almost inevitably be less than that of middle-class children."

Given their convictions about the severity of the constraints facing schools, both Murray and Rothstein have a defeatist attitude about school reform efforts. Murray warns against false hope: "Some say that the public schools are so awful that there is huge room for improvement in academic performance just by improving education. There are two problems with that position." The first problem, he suggests, is that the high percentage of students performing below the basic standard on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) may not be inconsistent with the upper bounds of achievement, given the cognitive constraints of students.

"The second problem," Murray continues, "with the argument that education can be vastly improved is the false assumption that educators already know how to educate everyone and that they just need to try harder—the assumption that prompted No Child Left Behind. We have never known how to educate everyone." Accept the facts, he urges, as little can be expected from school reform.

Rothstein is similarly gloomy about the prospects for school improvement. He admits that some reforms may be well designed and have limited success, "but a careful examination of each claim that a particular school or practice has closed the race or social class achievement gap shows that the claim is unfounded." In most cases, he argues, claims of effective reforms are based on either a misanalysis of test scores or the selection of advantaged students into reform programs. His thesis is that school reform by itself can hardly make a dent in the achievement of low-income and minority students.

The argument that schools face constraints, whether cognitive or social, that significantly hinder progress has some superficial plausibility to it. We can all understand limits and the futility of trying to exceed them. If, for example, there is a constraint on the human life span, then efforts to extend life expectancy beyond that duration would obviously be unproductive. But before we give up on investing in medical research and improving our health, we might want to be convinced that we are already approaching the limits of how long humans can live. We wouldn't want to be deterred from making improvements unless we believed that we had reached the point where limitations made advances virtually impossible.

## Evidence on Constraints

What evidence do Murray and Rothstein provide that we are already at the upper bounds of what schools can do? Not very much. Murray points to the fact that national gains in educational achievement, particularly for those beginning on the lower end of the distribution, have been very hard to come by in the past few decades: "If we confine the discussion to children in the lower half of the intelligence distribution (education of the gifted is another story), the overall trend of the 20th century was one of slow, hard-won improvement." If educational progress has stalled, Murray suggests, it must be a sign that we are bumping up against the cognitive limits of students.

This argument is not very compelling. The stalled growth in educational achievement could be the result of diminishing returns on reform efforts, as Murray suggests. But the stall could also have been caused by a failure to adopt new, effective reform strategies. We wouldn't want to give up on trying to improve the school system in the absence of convincing evidence that no more gains could be wrought.

**check the facts**  
ODD COUPLE GREENE

Similarly, observers of Russia would note that gains in average life expectancy have been very hard to come by in recent decades. In fact, the average age of Russians at death has declined in recent years. But it would be completely wrong to conclude from this that no reforms could be pursued to improve life expectancy among the Russian populace. Simply observing a delay in progress and pointing out that there is a limit to the human life span (it is a matter of ceilings, you know) would blind one to the obvious reforms that the nation could adopt that might improve life expectancy, such as reducing rampant alcoholism, bringing its AIDS epidemic under control, and cleaning

up its environmental messes. Murray's reasoning is no more persuasive in advocating against improving Russian public health than it is against bettering American public schools.

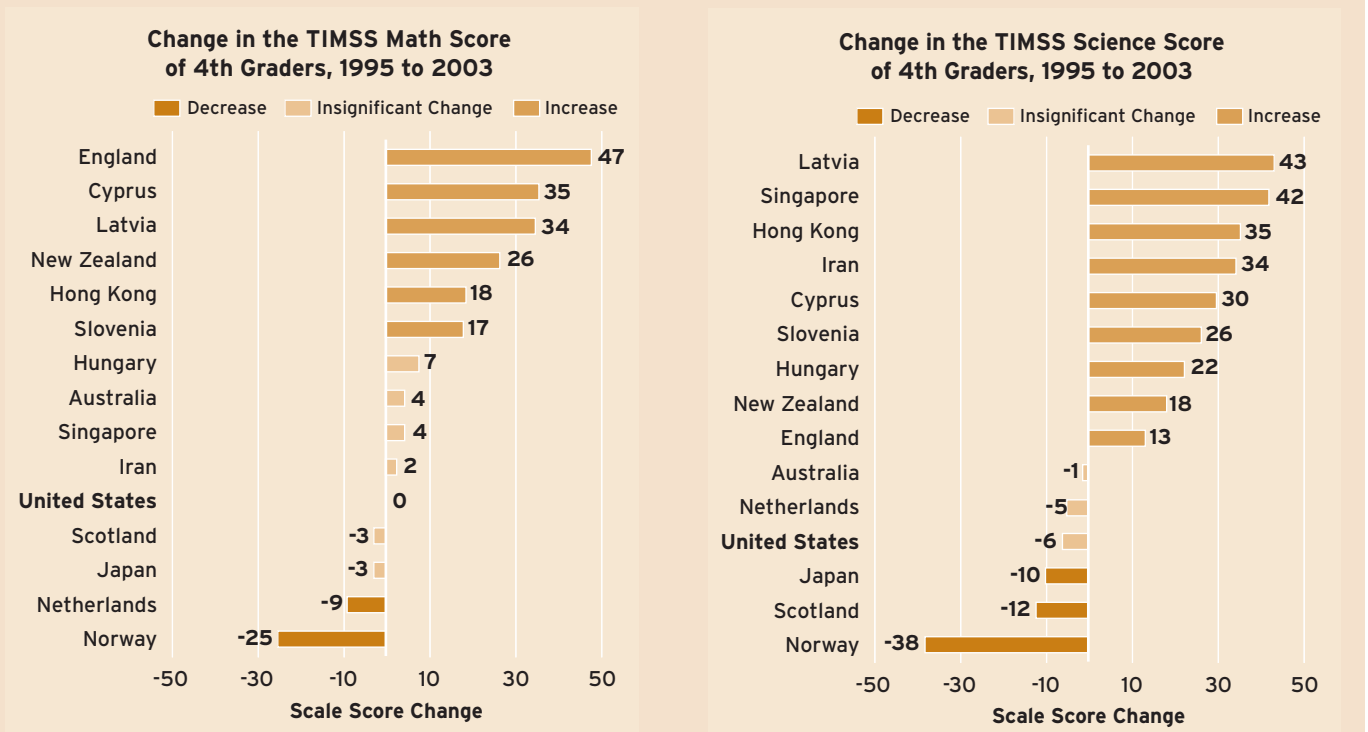
Of course, an astute observer might also note that Russian life expectancy is considerably lower than in other countries. Unless Russians are genetically cursed with a shorter life span, shouldn't the fact that people can live longer in other countries prove that Russian life expectancy is not hitting the limit? The same could be said of American education (see Figure 1). U.S. students perform significantly worse than students in many developed countries, according to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA),

Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and other international comparisons, trailing the leaders by more than half of a standard deviation. Shouldn't that prove that U.S. achievement has considerable room to improve before it hits the ceiling of cognitive constraints?

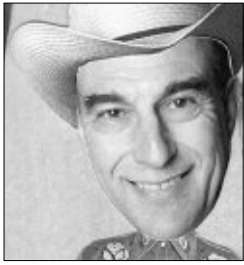
Unless we believe that (as Murray suggests in *The Bell Curve*) Singapore, Korea, Japan, and the Benelux countries demonstrate higher achievement because they are genetically blessed with higher IQs, then the existence of higher and still increasing achievement elsewhere in the world suggests considerable potential for school reform (see Figure 2). And we can't attribute the success of other developed countries

### Significant Improvement for Some (Figure 2)

While scores for U.S. students were flat or declined, more than half of the 15 countries that participated in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 4th-grade assessment saw a significant improvement between 1995 and 2003 in the math or science scores of their students.



SOURCE: Patrick Gonzales et al., "Highlights from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2003," National Center for Education Statistics



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simply to higher performance of their best students. Even their lower-achieving students outperform ours. The fact that the entire distribution of students in other developed countries outperforms the entire distribution of U.S. students suggests that there is a difference in the effectiveness of school systems across countries that school reform could remedy.

Rothstein's tack differs from Murray's in that Rothstein tries to provide evidence of the limited potential of school reform by debunking specific claims of successful efforts. For example, Rothstein contends that KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program), a network of charter schools that have produced impressive results with disadvantaged students, isn't as effective as it seems. KIPP's success, he argues, is largely attributable to the selection of more advantaged students into their schools, the investment of significantly greater resources, and the unusual motivation of their staff. These sources of KIPP's success, he suggests, cannot be replicated on a larger scale, so imitating or expanding KIPP cannot

meaningfully reform the school system as a whole.

He makes similar arguments about how efforts to improve teacher quality, instructional approaches like Success for All, and high-expectation techniques practiced by educators like Jaime Escalante and Rafe Esquith are not promising models for reform because their success is due to the selection of students or other factors that cannot be replicated on a broader scale. By undercutting these reform strategies and presenting evidence on the powerful influence of social class on student achievement, Rothstein hopes to convince us that we can expect little from focusing on reform within the school system.

Leaving aside the merits of Rothstein's critique of these specific reforms, the general problem with Rothstein's argument is that he attempts to demonstrate the limited potential of all school reforms by attacking a handful of them. So he picks a few prominent reform models that have not demonstrated large gains using the most rigorous evaluation techniques. Mind you, he

doesn't produce any evidence to demonstrate that these reforms are ineffective; he only raises plausible doubts given their lack of convincing proof.

But what about reforms that have produced significant gains for students, according to evaluations adhering to the highest social science standards? He doesn't address those. Studies have evaluated several reforms using random-assignment research designs, also used in most medical experiments, in which subjects are randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. Random assignment helps eliminate concerns that program outcomes result from the selection of students, to which Rothstein attributes the apparent success of many reform claims.

Expanding school choice has been shown to improve achievement for minority students by about one-third of a standard deviation after a few years of intervention, according to seven of eight random-assignment evaluations (the eighth showed positive but statistically insignificant effects). The famous Tennessee STAR random assignment study evaluated class size reduction, which also produced about a one-third of a standard deviation improvement in achievement for minority students. The What Works Clearinghouse, which the U.S. Department of Education operates, lists more than a dozen school interventions that have shown significant effectiveness in rigorous evaluations, several of which used random assignment.

We don't just have evidence of effective school reforms from well-studied pilot programs; we also have such evidence from large-scale initiatives that have produced improvements for low-income and minority students. For example, when Massachusetts began to require passage of a 10th-grade exam for a regular diploma, the percentage of African American and Hispanic students passing more than doubled. When Florida threatened to offer vouchers to students at chronically

failing public schools, those schools made significant gains. These achievements in Massachusetts and Florida aren't simply improvements on state tests, which could be subject to manipulation, but are confirmed by progress on national tests administered in those states.

We may not all agree on which reforms have been proven effective, but we could all agree that at least some of these reforms, perhaps used in combination, could make a large difference in the academic achievement of low-income and minority students. To dismiss the potential of significant change through school reform is to dismiss a large collection of rigorous social science and the bulk of experience.

Rothstein may feel justified in downplaying hopes for school reform because of the evidence he presents on the large influence social class has on academic achievement. He is entirely correct in observing the strong evidence showing that family income, parental education,

large influence on health outcomes. But almost no one uses this evidence to reduce our expectations for health improvements from medical interventions. We still (rightly) believe that doctors can and should make a difference in our health. Why shouldn't we expect the same from teachers, even if we acknowledge the strong influence of factors outside their control?

### Comments in Context

Murray and Rothstein are likely to contend that I have made a caricature of their views. They can point to portions of their writings that affirm their commitment to school reform. For example, Murray writes, "This is not to say that American public schools cannot be improved. Many of them, especially in large cities, are dreadful." And Rothstein observes, "Readers should not misinterpret this emphasis as implying that better schools are not important, or

with a stern warning not to expect much: "But even the best schools under the best conditions cannot repeal the limits on achievement set by limits on intelligence."

Rothstein makes more concessions to the possibility of progress in schools, but his pessimism about reform is also patently obvious. Although his book contains a chapter of suggested reforms that might help close the achievement gap, reforms within schools are noticeably absent. The chapter does include the need to integrate schools, which is not presented as a reform in how schools operate but as a change in the societal composition of schools. The chapter also advocates addressing income inequality, providing stable housing, expanding access to health clinics, and strengthening preschool, afterschool, and summer school programs. The only in-school reform that Rothstein mentions is the need to stop invoking



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family composition, housing stability, and other social factors have a substantial effect on student achievement. But it does not follow that we should therefore hold little hope for results from school reform.

Similarly, it is well established that health behaviors, such as diet, exercise, smoking, and drinking, have a very

that school improvement will not make a contribution to narrowing the achievement gap."

But these are throwaway lines, completely at odds with the clear, overall thrust of their arguments. For example, Murray immediately follows his acknowledgment that there might be some potential in school reform

slogans like "no excuses" to raise expectations for results because it undermines teacher morale. He adds, "'no excuses' slogans provide ideological respectability for those wanting to hold schools accountable for inevitable failure." With phrases like "inevitable failure" and a complete focus on out-of-school reforms, it is

clear that Rothstein believes we can expect little from school reform.

### Politics of Inaction

Both Murray and Rothstein have large constituencies for their views. Murray's following is less visible, largely because his views on these matters lost respectability in polite company after the publication of *The Bell Curve*. But don't let his low profile on this issue fool you into believing that there aren't a significant number of influential people who share Murray's perspective. Believing that race and class differences in education outcomes can largely be explained by differences in cognitive limitations reinforces many people's private prejudices. Murray draws strength from his marginalized status, playing the role of the man brave enough to tell us the truth. Unfortunately, not every heretic is Galileo; sometimes they are just cranks.

Rothstein has a much larger and more vocal constituency. Everyone wishing to shift attention (and blame) away from schools pays heed to Rothstein's arguments. Saying that we cannot expect significant progress in schools until we first address a host of social ills outside of school is a recipe for inaction. Waiting for society to fix all of its injustices before we can really fix schools is like waiting for Godot. It will never come.

Not surprisingly, the teacher unions don't mind waiting. For example, the February 2006 issue of *NEA Today* features an article by David Berliner, the former head of the American Educational Research Association and professor at Arizona State University, that repeats Rothstein's argument with greater force and fewer reservations: "So why, when we have as much credible research making connections between poverty and school success, do we keep looking for other answers? (For example, it must be the low expectations of



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teachers!) What's surprising is, in the face of that research, we still concentrate our attention and resources on what happens inside low-performing schools when the real problems are outside those schools." In an appearance on C-SPAN, Berliner observed that students spend only 1,000 hours a year in school and another 5,000 waking hours with their families and friends. How are schools supposed to counter these larger influences, he wondered? Of course, we spend even less time each year with our doctor than we do in school, but we still have very high expectations for medicine to make a difference.

And to whom does Berliner credit his ideas? "These musings could have been written also by Jean Anyon, Bruce Biddle, Greg Duncan, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Gary Orfield, Richard Rothstein, and many others whose work I admire and from whom I borrow." So Rothstein's views reflect a broad and deep tradition within education circles. Preceding him are the likes of

Jean Anyon, for example, who writes in the *Teachers College Record*, "The structural basis for failure in inner-city schools is political, economic, and cultural, and must be changed before meaningful school improvement projects can be successfully implemented. Educational reforms cannot compensate for the ravages of society."

To be sure, Anyon, Berliner, and Rothstein are right to warn us that social forces play a significant role in educational achievement. And Murray is right that at some point cognitive limits do place a ceiling on student outcomes. But without strong evidence that ours are the best of all possible schools, we should reject attempts to shift attention from efforts to improve schools. Recognizing constraints is not the same as being paralyzed by them.

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