Rising social and economic inequality has become a national preoccupation. The growth of inequality is held at least partly responsible for everything from the recent increase in racial tension to anti-immigrant sentiment to the election of President Donald Trump. Most Americans also view inequality as a problem in itself, perhaps most importantly as a damper on mobility. A New York Times/CBS News poll from 2015 reported that only 35% of Americans believed that “anyone can get ahead.” A Gallup poll from the same year found that 63% of Americans thought income should be more evenly distributed.

But inequality is about more than just income. Lower- and upper-class communities have separated geographically and diverged in family structure, habits, outlook, and criminality. One source and effect of these trends is disparities in educational attainment. Children growing up in poor families and neighborhoods, including many black and Hispanic children, complete less schooling and acquire fewer academic skills than those from more affluent backgrounds, which severely limits their potential for social mobility.

The origins of existing achievement gaps, and potential strategies for closing them, have been the subject of research and study for decades, generating a complex theoretical and empirical literature. Numerous innovations and programs, involving large expenditures of public and private funds, have been devoted to increasing and equalizing achievement. Despite sustained efforts on multiple fronts, socioeconomic gaps in educational indicators have barely budged overall, resisting repeated waves of school reform and a multitude of initiatives designed to improve prospects for low-income students.

Amy L. Wax is the Robert Mundheim Professor of Law at the University of Pennsylvania Law School.
Two approaches in particular have received wide popular attention and strong professional advocacy for addressing inequalities in K-12 education. Both are motivated by a genuine desire to make headway against racial and economic inequalities in learning and achievement, and to improve prospects for disadvantaged children. The first seeks to reduce the number of high-poverty schools, which tend to be segregated both by class and race, by dispersing students from poor families to schools with predominantly middle-class or affluent students. The hope is that low-income students will acquire the habits, focus, and academic discipline of their classmates, as well as benefit from a more rigorous and orderly environment. So-called “income integration” initiatives have gained traction in a number of public-school districts nationwide. The second type of effort is directed at drastically altering the character of the schools disadvantaged students attend. So-called “no excuses” K-12 charter programs create a high-intensity, demanding, all-encompassing atmosphere designed to work a comprehensive improvement in poor students’ academic outcomes, as well as their outlook, habits, and behavior.

In short, both initiatives seek to shape and influence the behavior of poor students. But, perhaps because its efforts are so proactive and overt, this aspect of the no-excuses model has generated more controversy. Discussion of the cultural and behavioral factors that are partly responsible for stubborn racial and economic disparities in academic achievement makes many people squeamish if not downright angry. But if policymakers are serious about solving the problem, they’ll need to have the courage to be forthright in their aims. As we will see, ignoring part of the problem when seeking the solution will only sow the seeds of failure.

**BEST INTENTIONS**

Beginning with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, nationwide efforts to dismantle segregation and integrate schools through anti-discrimination lawsuits, although modestly successful on occasion, have ultimately foundered, producing neither dramatic racial integration nor significant improvements in academic outcomes for black students. Rapidly changing demographics, “white flight” to the suburbs, parents’ strong preference for neighborhood schools, a tenacious tradition of local control of public education, and the shortcomings and limitations inherent in judicial oversight of complex institutions have all undermined efforts to achieve widespread racial integration in the public schools. Lawsuits
extending over decades have almost all been abandoned or phased out by the courts in the wake of demographic and political realities and the limited success of litigation.

Legal efforts to correct the effects of past official discrimination were followed by sporadic attempts, initiated by local governments and school districts, to reduce school segregation by voluntarily adopting race-conscious school-assignment plans. In 2007 in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, the United States Supreme Court invalidated race-conscious plans in Seattle, Washington, and Louisville, Kentucky, finding that explicitly pursuing racial balance in K-12 schools by using race as a criterion for admission and placement was impermissible under the Constitution’s equal protection clause.

Following these failures, attention turned to “in place” enrichment programs designed to upgrade and improve public schools that serve low-income children generally, which tend to be concentrated in heavily minority areas. One national initiative was Title I of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, enacted in 1965, which funnels money and resources to low-achieving schools in an effort to produce greater equality across districts and to supplement educational offerings for disadvantaged children. A more recent legislative effort, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, relied chiefly on block grants backed up by a detailed set of mandates and goals for teacher quality, curriculum, and student performance. Although these programs have helped some schools and students, they have not significantly enhanced low-income students’ learning overall. Nor have they significantly narrowed race and class achievement gaps, which remain large.

Faced with these anemic results, policymakers have continued to search for ways to improve academic outcomes and life chances for low-income students. Two important approaches have emerged. In the wake of the Supreme Court’s hostility to race-conscious integration and in recognition of the disproportionate number of minority, and especially black, children from poor families, localities have adopted plans to integrate schools by income instead of race. Alternatively, no-excuses charter schools have sprung up in a number of urban, heavily minority districts around the country, targeting their efforts at the populations of disadvantaged students in those locations.

Income-mixing initiatives seek to modify and improve low-income students’ academic performance, as well as their conduct and attitudes.
The project of income integration assumes that attending school with mostly poor classmates depresses achievement, and that being surrounded by more affluent students enhances it. The uplift and improvement of poor children can be accomplished simply by immersing them in a predominantly “middle class” environment.

In describing how this model works in practice, two leading proponents, Richard Kahlenberg of the Century Foundation and James Ryan, the dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, cite an amalgam of institutional and interpersonal forces. On the institutional side, they note that schools dominated by affluent students have more elaborate and better-kept facilities, better-educated and effective teachers, less teacher turnover, more capable principals, and a richer variety of academically demanding courses and extracurricular offerings. Parents of children who attend these schools are generally more involved in the day-to-day management of the school, are more vocal and politically savvy in looking out for their children’s interests, and are more effective in procuring desirable resources and services. Income mixing gives lower-income students access to the material and institutional advantages of these schools, including the benefits of effective parental oversight.

On the interpersonal side, income mixing also relies heavily on assumed peer effects and cultural contagion. Although the goal of enhancing low-income students’ academic achievement is paramount, it is clear that proponents expect improvements in the behaviors and attitudes that support learning. At the typical well-off suburban school, the atmosphere is one of order, cooperation, compliance with rules, and respect for authority. Most students hold high expectations for academic achievement, rigor, diligence, effort, and future prospects. Because individuals tend to conform to the dominant culture, it is assumed that low-income students placed in such schools will come to hold those high expectations as well, and change their behavior accordingly.

The no-excuses model, in contrast to income-mixing initiatives that rely on demographic manipulation alone, sets up charter schools designed to actively address the attributes thought to hold back low-income students through a hands-on, paternalistic model of behavioral modification and direction. Funded and designed mainly by private entrepreneurs, these schools have proliferated nationwide in the past two decades. Although differing in precise methods and location, they draw their students chiefly from low-income communities, and many
are heavily or exclusively populated by disadvantaged minorities. Most are modeled on the KIPP, or Knowledge is Power Program, academies, a nationwide chain of about 200 schools, mostly at the elementary- and middle-school levels. Other schools that represent variations on this model are profiled by David Whitman in *Sweating the Small Stuff*, his exhaustive review of no-excuses schools and their practices; they include the Amistad Academy in New Haven, Connecticut, the Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Chicago, and the SEED School public boarding school in Washington, D.C.

The hallmark of no-excuses schools is a frankly paternalistic and unapologetic commitment to acculturating low-income students to the achievement-oriented habits and norms typical of their middle-class and affluent counterparts. That project is motivated by the belief that low-income children will benefit from a stable, highly structured environment in which conventional, bourgeois behaviors are actively endorsed, expected, and demanded. The list of these schools’ common features is long and detailed. On the academic side, they prescribe a uniform, rigorous pre-college curriculum, with little student discretion in course of study. Most extend academic instruction through a longer school day, week, and year, with academic activities and assignments scheduled throughout the summer months. Basic skill acquisition is a top priority, with performance levels and progress continually monitored and measured through frequent quizzing and testing. There is also an active attempt to inculcate “learned optimism”; children are expected to adopt positive attitudes toward academic work and a hopeful outlook on the future. Without exception, these schools work to build a collective culture of achievement and college going, with repeated emphasis on college attendance and completion.

In support of the academic mission, the schools work constantly to inculcate decorum and refinement, according to the unspoken rules of deportment that characterize middle- and upper-class families, schools, and communities. A key part of the KIPP code, adopted by many other schools, is to “be nice.” Courtesy is expected, and street language and profanity are strictly forbidden, as are fighting, loud talk, boisterous behavior, harsh teasing, and ridicule of other students, both in and out of the classroom. Students are expected to obey teachers and administrators, make eye contact, be punctual, participate in classroom discussions and school activities, work steadily, and study hard.
Violations of the elaborate behavioral code are swiftly punished, and a “zero tolerance” atmosphere prevails. In response to infractions and rule breaking great and small, these schools do not shrink from using conventional sanctions, including in-school and out-of-school suspensions, community service, corrective exercises, and occasional expulsion.

Principals and teachers are given a high degree of autonomy, but they are also expected to put in long days teaching, advising, grading, and monitoring students. In all but rare cases, the teachers at no-excuses schools, which are almost all private charters, are not unionized. This creates flexibility for assignments, hours, and allocation of responsibility. Most teachers arrive through unconventional channels, with significant numbers coming from stints with Teach for America, which draws many elite college graduates. No-excuses schools do not expect deep or active involvement from parents. But all necessarily rely on parents’ getting their children to school on time and checking homework, and most require parents to sign a contract pledging to meet these requirements. Finally, in contrast to many public and private schools, charter schools are bare-bones operations without fancy facilities or technologies. In general, teaching methods are old fashioned, with an emphasis on memorization, structured learning, and “drill and kill” exercises directed at the mastery of basic skills.

In sum, no-excuses schools are totalizing, prescriptive, and heavily traditional in their approach. They attempt to control and regulate low-income children’s in-school experience by setting high and clear standards through an elaborate and explicit code of conduct. The hope is that students will learn new behaviors that are more in keeping with middle- and upper-class expectations and that will foster and enhance their academic progress and success.

**Mixed Results**

Both of these models seek to improve low-income students’ school performance, future prospects, and occupational success. Each is controversial, and each has achieved mixed results.

For income mixing, the question of whether, how much, and under what circumstances going to school with more advantaged students benefits low-income or minority students is unsettled, with much ink spilled over conflicting assertions. Advocates point to successes, such as the Montgomery County, Maryland, school district, which claims
measurable, albeit modest, academic improvements, at least in the short term, in reading and math for low-income elementary-school students sent to predominantly middle-class schools through a program of dispersed low-income housing. But apart from data on a few places like Montgomery County, the evidence on school integration by income is strikingly sparse, mixed, and incomplete. And despite a vocal core of advocacy and a spate of initiatives, comprehensive overviews of available data on income-integration effects are infrequent and, thus, rare. A 1990 review by Christopher Jencks and Susan Mayer still represents perhaps the most thorough attempt to assess what is known about income mixing in schools and neighborhoods. The authors found evidence for a boost in the high-school graduation rates for poor and minority students attending higher-quality schools, but less consistent effects on college attendance and completion, academic achievement, cognitive skills, socialization, and behavior.

Specifically, the authors noted that “[s]tudies of how a school’s mean [socioeconomic status] affects students’ academic achievement yield mixed results” depending on a complex set of situational and demographic factors. In general, the equivocal nature of the evidence can be ascribed to the diversity of situations in which initiatives have been tried. Income-integration programs have been adopted in diverse, far-flung locations, and there are significant variations in the range of mechanisms for achieving integration (such as student-assignment and magnet-school plans), the types of students targeted for dispersion (with the most common, albeit not uniform, qualification being eligibility for free or reduced-price meals), and the characteristics of the schools into which students are shifted. Because almost all plans require students to travel to out-of-neighborhood schools, they are restricted in their ability to shift poor students to more affluent settings, which limits the degree of class mixing achieved. And the programs have been of variable duration, with some—for example, the Wake County, North Carolina, effort—either scaled back or phased out after a few years due to logistical obstacles or political opposition. For these reasons and others, the data regarding actual income-integration efforts and their outcomes are often spotty and incomplete.

Resolving empirical questions surrounding the effectiveness of income integration is made more difficult by uncertainty about the mechanisms that are supposed to be responsible for its benefits. The
focus of research is on documenting measurable improvements rather than on disentangling causal factors. Accordingly, as Jencks and Mayer note, while the “epidemic model” of schools and neighborhoods—the notion that peers influence behavior and “like begets like”—is widely embraced, “few examine the implications of this idea in detail.” One 2005 review by Russell Rumberger and Gregory Palardy of the educational effects of high-school demography found evidence that the factors that seem to matter for improvements for low-income students in integrated settings include high teacher expectations, more hours of homework completed, college-prep courses, and a lower percentage of students reporting feeling unsafe. But they report no evidence for positive effects from superior peer examples, more school resources, and other institutional factors.

Despite the limitations in the data and the difficulties of coming to firm conclusions, some results emerge. Most research, including recent data from Montgomery County summarized in a report by Heather Schwartz, suggests that improvements for low-income students dissipate when poor students are more than about 20% to 30% of the school population. In addition, most studies fail to eliminate a role for selection effects as a factor in observed gains. For instance, the low-income students in the Montgomery County study were all from public-housing families willing to move to a suburban setting. As the report itself notes, these families were likely not representative of urban low-income populations generally. Depending on the design of the particular income-mixing program at issue, the same point can be made about many disadvantaged students who are willing to take the trouble to transfer to higher-income schools.

Finally, although poor students placed in integrated schools may sometimes do better than similar students in high-poverty settings, they generally start out far behind more affluent classmates, continue to lag, and, as a group, never catch up. As a result, poor students sent to middle-class schools tend to be placed into non-accelerated classes. And they earn worse grades and score lower than classmates on standardized tests. They also are underrepresented in Advanced Placement and gifted and talented programs. These results are not surprising in light of James Coleman’s original findings in the 1960s, repeatedly confirmed in the decades since, that children’s economic, social, and family backgrounds, and not school composition and quality, are the most important influences on students’ academic performance and behavior. As Jencks and
Mayer state, “As a rule, the more aspects of family background we control, the smaller neighborhood and school effects look.” Thus, income mixing can at best narrow achievement gaps. It cannot come close to eliminating them.

As for no-excuses schools, vaunting claims and optimism abound. David Whitman documents in *Sweating the Small Stuff* that dramatic gains in test scores have been reported for students enrolled in a number of the elementary and secondary schools profiled in his book. For instance, Amistad Academy in New Haven reported a significant jump in math and reading proficiency scores on statewide tests, with some students performing “almost as well” as wealthier students in Greenwich, Connecticut. Some of these numbers appear impressive. However, as with income integration, caution is in order for several reasons. Evidence for academic improvement comes almost exclusively from scores on statewide tests, which assess relatively basic skills that many no-excuses schools target with intensive drilling. Most score gains are relatively modest and are subject to fade-out with time. Overall, the data is spotty and limited by small samples and short time frames.

On these schools’ long-term goal of getting students into and through college, the jury is out. College entrance exam scores from no-excuses high-school students are surprisingly hard to come by. So far, reported SAT scores from a handful of the no-excuses high schools described by David Whitman remain abysmally low and below the minimum levels for any college, let alone competitive ones. Most no-excuses schools are too new to have produced data on effects on graduates’ future employment and earnings, family structure, crime, and other long-term parameters. And, once again, it is worth noting that, although many no-excuses students appear to outperform public-school students from similar backgrounds, their scores fall well short of those achieved by wealthier students. It is telling that, of the hundreds of students who have graduated from Success Academy elementary- and middle-school charter programs in New York City, none gained admission in 2014 or 2015 to the city’s highly competitive specialized public high schools, and only six (out of 54 who took the admissions test) were admitted in 2016. In short, significant achievement gaps remain according to family income and education.

As with income mixing, attempts to show the benefits of a no-excuses education are also compromised by potential selection bias. Such institutions
frequently insist that they do not cherry-pick their students and are committed to taking all comers. But there is reason to believe, as critic Richard Rothstein has noted, that the students in these schools are not representative of the low-income population as a whole. Factors such as selective teacher referrals, high attrition rates, and an overrepresentation of girls and siblings mean that the students at no-excuses schools are more capable and determined than poor students generally.

Moreover, the parents of students who persist and succeed at these schools must pledge to get their children to school every day and on time, and to ensure that homework is done. Unfortunately, many parents from poor, urban communities are either unwilling or unable to meet even these modest requirements, which means their children never enter these schools or end up dropping out. In addition, there is evidence that the families of many no-excuses students are financially better off than the average family in their communities and are more likely to have two parents at home. All of these factors tend to enhance students’ academic performance independent of school effects.

POLITICS AND PRACTICALITY

The data on the benefits for low-income children from the two types of initiatives covered here are voluminous and conflicting, and a comprehensive assessment is beyond this article’s scope. Nonetheless, given what is known to date, it is fair to say that neither model consistently bests the other at improving low-income students’ academic outcomes. Although there is evidence pointing to positive gains from both, and there are some indications that no-excuses charters might have an edge, the magnitude and duration of each model’s supposed advantages—especially for poor children’s employment, earnings, and general life outcomes—remain to be seen.

But educational efficacy is not the only consideration in deciding which of these strategies should be favored and how much society should invest in each. In assessing the feasibility of these models, pragmatic and political considerations loom large.

The income-integration model has significant practical shortcomings, the most important of which is demography. Research confirms that income mixing produces measurable improvements only if poor students attend mostly middle-class or affluent schools. And the obstacles to shifting students out of low-income schools to more middle-class
settings are formidable. Existing neighborhood patterns of segregation by race and class are pronounced, so, as already noted, many students must travel long distances and attend school far from home. Long travel times are expensive, undermine parental involvement and community support for schools, and run up against parents’ reluctance to have young children, and even adolescents, spend hours in transit. In addition, urban districts with students most likely to benefit from class integration serve predominantly poor and minority students, with middle- and upper-class families in short supply or opting for private education. The paucity of middle-class students in the system thus often renders in-district income integration infeasible. Such inconvenient facts tend to be overlooked in debates on the subject.

Efforts to model income mixing using national demographic data confirm these insights. According to data analyzed by Ann Mantil, Anne Perkins, and Stephanie Aberger, the benefits from redistribution within and across multiple neighboring districts, even if implemented nationwide on a large scale, would vary widely, and efforts would decrease the percentage of high-poverty schools in some states by no more than about 10% to 15%. The number of schools with a low-income population below 20% — the only category shown to have measurable benefits for poor students — would barely budge.

In addition, even in the locations where income mixing is most feasible, integration can prove unstable. Officials in Wake County, North Carolina, in their efforts to maintain socioeconomically diverse schools in the face of a growing and volatile population, were constantly forced to rebalance the composition of the district’s schools, with frequent and even yearly reassignment of students and siblings sometimes placed in different schools. These adjustments generated considerable disruption for parents and children. In the face of growing opposition and political turmoil, the Wake County school board eventually curtailed and then phased out the county’s centrally coordinated income-integration program, opting for continuity, predictability, and convenience over diversity.

Yet another problem with income mixing is the paucity of reliable evidence on whether going to school with low-income students can harm more affluent classmates. The income-mixing model is premised on the understanding that norms are contagious: Simply by being exposed to better habits and values, the less fortunate will adopt the ways of the more privileged. But what about the opposite possibility? Perhaps
students from tough backgrounds will impart bad habits and attitudes to better-off schoolmates. Although such “reverse contagion” is given short shrift by proponents, its potential to operate in some contexts has not been definitively repudiated.

Christopher Jencks and Susan Mayer, in their 1990 review, describe as inconclusive the evidence on whether affluent students suffer academically from infusions of poor or minority students. Based on more recent data, Russell Rumberger and Gregory Palardy speculated in 2005 that, because students across the income and ability spectrum can be shown to benefit from attending high-performing schools, aggressive efforts to homogenize schools’ demographic profiles will likely hurt better-prepared students, with predicted declines for the highest-achieving students (who are now concentrated in high-income schools) exceeding the expected gains for low-income and minority students.

On the behavioral front, data on reverse contagion are similarly hard to come by. One recent study suggests that disruptive classmates can lower classmates’ future earnings, but there is little credible evidence beyond that on behaviors such as delinquency and rule breaking. At least two studies, however, suggest that students can be adversely influenced by classmates’ sexual and reproductive behavior, with one showing that attending school with low-income or minority classmates increases the likelihood of childbearing before graduation, and another indicating that students with a significant number of disadvantaged black classmates (who initiate sex at younger ages on average) tend to engage earlier in sexual intercourse.

Finally, there are harms to the beneficiaries themselves. Robert Crosnoe and others have noted that, because students are evaluated relative to their peers in the same school, poor students transferred to more affluent institutions tend to experience a “frog pond effect,” losing out to more capable and sophisticated students in the competition for grades and social standing, and reporting a decline in self-perception and emotional well-being.

No-excuses schools face their own challenges. One common objection is that they are hard to “scale up.” KIPP academies, the most extensive network of high-intensity charter schools, has opened only about 200 schools nationwide in the two decades since its founding, serving 80,000 of the nation’s 50 million students. One important obstacle to faster growth is teachers. As David Whitman puts it, “[T]here
are serious questions as to whether there is adequate talent in the current teacher and principal pool to expand the new paternalism to scale.”

Teaching in these schools is regularly described as a “calling” and a total lifestyle. Teachers must be willing to put in long hours, take on heavy workloads, engage in regular, personalized review of student assignments, and be available around the clock to support students and handle crises. Teachers must also be willing to hold students to high standards, to closely monitor their behavior, and to impose consistent discipline for infractions.

The number of teachers who can and will fulfill these intense, sometimes countercultural demands is necessarily limited, which makes classroom staffing a constant challenge, and turnover and burnout important limiting factors. Knowledgeable, well-trained teachers cost money, and the challenge of staffing these schools adds considerably to their price tag. In addition, the movement to expand school choice through the spread of private charters, which include schools run on the high-intensity no-excuses model, has some powerful detractors, especially on the left. Fears that charters will drain resources from public schools have impeded efforts to increase the number of no-excuses schools.

Another potential weakness is that the obsession of no-excuses schools with getting disadvantaged students into and, by extension, through college might eventually slow these schools’ momentum. Despite heroic efforts and some positive results, too many students emerging from these schools remain ill-equipped to succeed in college. The “Yale or jail” mentality that views joining the elite knowledge class as the only viable strategy for low-income children may not prove workable—or helpful—for most graduates. But the emphasis on strengthening character, fostering good habits, and building self-discipline might still be useful, especially if repurposed for other paths, including vocational training and a variety of low- or middle-skill jobs. The no-excuses approach could also help low-income students build stronger and more stable families and develop a more durable work ethic; both are as important as academic ability to overall life success.

Finally, at the heart of the no-excuses project is the assumption that poor children’s educational deficits are best addressed by actively reshaping the norms, habits, and behaviors formed by their families and communities. This idea is in tension with important strands of progressive thinking, which abhors “blaming the victim” and disdains the
notion that the poor are somehow “deficient.” Many also resent the double standard that prescribes regimentation, conformity, discipline, and “drill and kill” for low-income students, while reserving creative pursuits, self-expression, and a broader, content-rich curriculum for the better-off. Likewise, teachers’ unions are chary of the heavy, open-ended teaching duties and discretionary administrative authority that are the hallmarks of no-excuses institutions. These reservations mean that introducing the no-excuses model into public schools is a tough sell. For now, no-excuses charters remain a niche phenomenon that relies heavily on private funds. This necessarily limits how many such schools can be created and how many students they can educate.

**THE DANGEROUS OF EUPHEMBERISM**

As noted, both income mixing and no-excuses schools assume that, to succeed in school and in life, poor children need to be taught bourgeois, middle-class values — and socialized away from their culture of birth. This is a highly controversial and unpopular stance, especially on the left, which ascribes disadvantaged children’s poverty and academic troubles to oppressive social structures and defective institutions and is suspicious of projects that blame disadvantage on dysfunctional cultural norms.

Both approaches rest on this uncomfortable judgment; the difference is how forthright they are about their assumptions. Because they are committed to actively crafting and imposing middle-class norms, no-excuses schools must embrace this position openly and publicly. Because income mixing, in contrast, relies on passive effects, advocates can more easily get away with couching these predicates in euphemism and indirection. But once income mixing actually occurs, the cold realities of race and class disparities cannot long be suppressed. Schools alone cannot abolish inequalities. Even within high-quality schools, class and race differences in academic skill and socialization persist, a fact repeatedly confirmed by social science since James Coleman’s work in the 1960s. Unsurprisingly, these inconvenient facts rankle, and, for those wedded to a stringent version of egalitarian principles, the goals of uplift and amelioration transmogrify into the demand for equal results.

This danger is laid bare in a recent ethnographic study by Amanda Lewis and John Diamond, *Despite the Best Intentions*. The book is based on the authors’ study of Riverview, a “highly resourced” but racially mixed public high school in a comfortable suburb of a large Midwestern
city. Describing the school from a self-consciously progressive point of view, the authors toggle between accusations that the school’s disparities by race and class are delusory figments of distorted thinking, or that, although objectively real, they are the products of structural racism, class privilege, parental selfishness, and discrimination. Group differences in school outcomes represent ill-gotten gains that schools must equalize by ridding themselves of “white privilege,” “racialized hierarchies,” and “opportunity hoarding.”

To that end, the authors endorse the radical reforms proposed by the school’s most progressive elements. On the academic side, demands issue to eliminate tracking, dismantle honors classes, dumb down and “diversify” the curriculum, revise or water down the grading system, and lower the bar for AP classes. Standardized tests are a target of attack, with a number of black parents complaining that their children’s low test scores are unfairly impeding their admission to honors and AP classes. Likewise, issues surrounding school discipline loom large, with middle-class standards of behavior and decorum recast as a form of cultural hegemony imposed by well-off, mainly white parents intent on remaining in control. The imperative of equal outcomes exerts pressure to relax rules, reject zero tolerance, excuse defiance and disobedience as the expression of an alternative “cultural style,” and abandon conventional sanctions like suspensions in favor of cumbersome and unproven options like therapeutic counseling, mediation, and “restorative justice.” Those who resist these efforts to achieve the impossible are accused of racial bias, insensitivity, “blaming the victim,” and indulging in “racialized discourse.”

Although this portrait of Riverview High is focused primarily on race, these demands highlight the cultural contradictions inherent in all uplift models, whether race or income based. Proponents of income integration must deal with the cognitive dissonance created by the model’s foundational premise, which is that disadvantaged students’ habits and attitudes are deficient and will be improved by immersion in a superior environment, and discomfort with the idea of class-based cultural differences. This dissonance, and its attendant discomfort, yields strenuous efforts to deny or ablate existing disparities by any means necessary. If poor children cannot be brought up to privileged standards, then those standards must be revised, or lowered, to put everyone on the same level.
The problem is that those efforts weaken the very qualities of middle-class schools that are essential to the model's effectiveness. On the academic side, rigor, ranking, testing, conventional measures of achievement, and strong academic standards foster the analytic skills and mindset essential to enhancing disadvantaged students’ performance and learning. Acceptance and accommodation of poor students’ “cultural style” interferes with the goal of bringing low-income students’ deportment up to the level of their more affluent classmates, and “defining deviancy down” through the relaxation of standards and sanctions undermines the preservation of an orderly and respectful classroom environment that, recent research suggests, is essential to all students’ academic progress.

Above all, weakening the disciplinary expectations that prevail in middle-class schools threatens to compromise the quality of schools through its negative effects on teachers. Although confounded by recent accusations of discrimination in school discipline, evidence has nonetheless accumulated that children from poor families are more likely to engage in a range of misbehaviors that are disruptive both to their own and others’ learning. For this reason, an influx of disadvantaged students can itself lead to more classroom disorder. Restrictions on sanctions for poor behavior just threaten to compound this effect. The problem is that unruly classrooms tend to drive away the best teachers, who are known to avoid unsafe, disorderly environments. This helps explain why high-poverty schools have more trouble attracting and keeping the most qualified teachers, who are acknowledged to be critical to maintaining academic excellence. Indeed, many K-12 experts believe that the presence of outstanding teachers contributes significantly to the superiority of middle-class schools.

These concerns are not merely theoretical. There are recent reports that the Highline school district in Washington state precipitated a full-scale teacher rebellion with its efforts to replace home suspensions with in-school “restorative justice” programs. A similar initiative in Saint Paul, Minnesota, was implemented despite concerns from teachers and parents that the district’s disciplinary policies were already too lenient, in light of a recent spate of student attacks on teachers. The Obama administration’s initiative to tighten oversight of public-school disciplinary practices by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, based on racially disparate effects of standard penalties (such as
suspensions) as well as hard-to-assess accusations that minority students are being treated more harshly for similar infractions, has put additional pressure on integrated schools to equalize rates of disciplinary sanctions by race and class.

Whether justified or not (and that question is disputed), these official efforts translate, at least initially, into more disruptive, disrespectful, and violent students sitting in classrooms with a socioeconomically mixed student population, which is bound to alienate teachers. Likewise, well-off parents, who are keenly interested in and sensitive to school safety, order, and decorum, tend to flee schools where disciplinary standards are relaxed, which makes it harder to maintain the middle-class demographic and atmosphere essential to income mixing’s success.

Finally, the alternatives proposed for dealing with student infractions also threaten to undermine school quality by siphoning away time, attention, and resources that could be devoted to academic pursuits and extracurricular activities. In an effort to address disparities in rates of school discipline, Saint Paul has spent millions of dollars, and countless personnel hours, on “cultural competency” instruction, “white privilege” training, and “restorative justice” programs. This has upset and alienated the teachers and parents who are critical to maintaining schools’ middle-class character. A recent *New York Times Magazine* article on school discipline alternatives such as mediation and counseling describes these programs as time-consuming and “exhausting,” and makes clear that teachers are ill-equipped to deal with their demands and are resentful of their distractions from teaching and learning.

In sum, there is no evidence that introducing these disciplinary innovations actually advances the goals of income integration or comports with the understandings behind that model. And there is strong evidence that these measures will end up undermining income integration’s effectiveness.

**Finding What Works**

The reality of racial disparities in academic capabilities and outcomes within and across schools is a stubborn fact. The same holds for class—in fact, achievement differences by family income now equal or exceed those by race. Widening gulfs by income status in family structure and other sources of social capital suggest these patterns will continue indefinitely. Shifting poor students to better schools can at
best alleviate observed differences in academic achievement. There is no evidence this strategy can close them.

That fact does not keep many participants from being disappointed, which in turn generates pressure to change the ways schools operate. Because this pressure unleashes forces that alter the very character of the schools themselves, income integration is necessarily an unstable project. The enormous social-engineering effort required to achieve income integration and the turmoil and tension that it often generates argue against a large-scale push to manipulate public-school demography. Although some income mixing will occur spontaneously in many places, attempts to impose that condition on a wide scale are not worth the effort and are likely to backfire.

The no-excuses alternative, in contrast, is better equipped to negotiate the tensions between uplift models and progressive commitments, and to deal with the persistence of race and class differences. Such schools educate mainly low-income students, which renders socioeconomic disparities less salient. The important comparisons are not to better-off students, but to similar children educated in less-demanding settings. The goal is maximum improvement rather than impossible equalization. Because students and teachers need not constantly confront inequalities that are the product of larger social forces, the embrace of active acculturation can proceed without apology to beneficiaries or benefactors.

In the current ideologically charged climate, separate and unequal is superior to, and more effective than, diverse and unequal. While no-excuses schools and income integration have their respective strengths and weaknesses, the former emerges as a better approach to educating the disadvantaged.