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**"Our Schools Suck":
A Book Review
The Substance of Truth
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"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."

- Alonso, Gaston; Anderson, Noel; Su, Celina; Theoharis, Jeanne. [Our Schools Suck: Students Talk Back to a Segregated Nation on the Failures of Urban Education](#). New York: NYU Press, 2009, p. 5.

"God is tired of you..."

- Bill Cosby, speech at NAACP commemorative *Brown* gala (2004)

The rhetoric of public figures like Bill Cosby, Juan Williams, Orlando Patterson, and Herman Badillo examined in the first chapter casts public disregard as tough love. *God is tired of you*. These are young people. *God is tired of you*. Whose sense of self is still being formed. *God is tired of you*."

- P. 110.

Our Schools Suck is an excellent resource for anyone distressed with the "culture of failure" stereotypes commentators, administrators, and politicians have used to disrupt any meaningful intervention into the dilapidated, segregated education system. The

authors hold no prisoners in meticulously debunking, dismissing and distilling these much-circulated untruths about "inner-city youth as dark menaces to society, shadowy figures lurking around corners who [refuse] to attend school." [p. 6]

Through compelling stories narrated by the experiences of Black and Latino students in the criminal school system, readers aren't left clueless as to why many of them argue their schools "suck." An alternative title for the book could have been, "A People's History of Urban Education." Howard Zinn's classic text, "[A People's History of the United States: 1492 to Present \(P.S.\)](#)," clearly had an impact on the authors' decision to put at center the voices of Black and Latino students, crying in the wilderness of a heartless education system which appears desperate to hold as many of them back as it can.

The book is facilitated with familiar structural themes that have long mired the educational development of "urban" students: Dilapidated buildings, inadequate resources, understaffing of counselors and teachers, militarization of hallways, overcrowding of classrooms, industrialization of school complexes, criminalization of students, inappropriate security policies, etc. Unfortunately, the book points out, this reality escapes the analyses of esteemed moralists like Dr. Bill Cosby - accused of sexual assault by more than 12 women (one settled out of court) - who "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." [p. 17]

What uninformed critics are nonchalant in acknowledging, they argue, is that, as much as the world is demanded of students, the school system fails woefully in practicing reciprocity. "[T]hese young people are expected to be responsible (about attending school, doing their homework, making plans for college) while the school district does not have to demonstrate an equal level of responsibility in providing" the requisite amount of resources needed to guarantee a "productive learning environment." The hypocrisy of the school system is examined in the case study of a Los Angeles School, *Freemont High*, which is described as "one of the most troubled schools" in the state. [p. 71]

Freemont is a succinct validation of the well-documented, though highly resisted, assertion of a parallel between the Prison Industrial Complex and the Education Industrial Complex. Up until a couple of years ago, Freemont was operated year-round. No breaks. When a student, Akeishia McKnight, complained to the then-superintendent, Roy Romer, about the hazardous learning conditions in her school, she was complimented with this reply: "It is the policy of this district that once a school becomes so over-crowded that more than 250 students are bused out to other schools, it must be put on the year-round calendar. That is the situation at Freemont... [A]t this point, we don't expect there to be a change at Freemont in the foreseeable future..." [p. 72]

Children are the future - the leaders of tomorrow?!? Like prisoners, they are "bused out" to other "schools" - penitentiaries?!? - due to "overcrowding." The implications of Romer's reply are too voluminous to be covered in the body of a book review. [See: <http://www.decentschools.org/declarations/decl-0206.pdf>, p. 6]

Though Freemont is explained by these skilled educators as "rundown," and a place where "roaches, ants, and rats make periodic appearances in class... the bathrooms are often dirty, and students are not allowed to go to the bathroom during lunch or during class," the superintendent couldn't find anything worthy of "change." [p. 74] Akeishia McKnight is, instead, told to stay in school, *get that education*, get better grades, study harder, and hope for the best, even if, and when, her classroom is less tolerable than an inmate's cell. When these victimized students, in bell hooks' words, "talk back," it is left to the Roy Romers of this world to remind them of their unimportance.

Heckuva Job, Roy!

Their schools "suck" and they "hate" it. One student, Naima, poignantly recounted her first experience in middle school: "My first day... was horrible. I didn't want to go to that school, so I cried the whole day. When we were in the office and I was getting ready to get my classes I was crying real loud saying I didn't want to go to that school, because it was dirty and the people were dirty and I hated it there.... That's when I first started to hate school." [p. 87] Ill-equipped with the emotional weaponry necessary to battle the school system successfully, many of them resort to self-blame, as a "claim to agency, a way to assert their own power to change their situations amidst the structural constraints of their schooling..." [p. 96]

Our Schools Suck wastes no time in exposing No Child Left Behind (NCLB) for the farce it is. NCLB, they argue, brought forth the terrorizing institution of standardized testing, a mechanism so devastating in its effects, that schools have been shut down, teachers fired, principals switched, and students punished, for underperformance on it. The authors share an incident where teachers, like prison wardens on inspection day, "bombarded students with reminders of continual exhortations to 'make the school proud'." The same schools which refused to intervene in the astronomical drop out and truancy rates of its' students hastily called up their homes, to stress "the importance of the test." [p. 106]

Chucky, an highly articulate student, assailed the meaning, matter and measure of standardized tests: "... I really don't like to say anything about tests but this one sucks is like I was in a room, but it's all empty from the inside." Chucky noted that students are essentially forced to take the tests, because the "school staff said that this test is really important to us. This test is crap because it's supposed to show us how smart we really are but I don't need to know how smart I am because I try hard and that is how I get far in my classes." [p. 107] Standardized tests are deemed "important," but the pursuit of intellectual freedom, critical thinking, and independent reasoning can be grounds for punishment. *Our Schools Suck* contends whether this disparity lies in the fact that those tests are largely used as political propaganda tools to control the minds of students - hence state-sponsored. [p. 109]

The grievances of Black and Latino students predominantly "fall[s] on deaf ears," say the authors, and are rendered immaterial. [p. 120] Perhaps it's because policy makers hate to be told, as one student eloquently stated, that the classes feel "like a factory... Like a sweatshop... 'Go to work, do this, sit down and focus. Ya'll gonna fail the citywide test if you don't get this'." [p. 124] Such stinging rebuke is sure to miss its targets' attention, for they know that when Black and Latino students are presented with avenues to express themselves unashamedly, eloquence takes stage, brilliance

breaks forth, and perspicacity shines bright.

Yet, all that they demand is the fiduciary "right to get to school and learn." [p. 147] Starved of this essentiality, many have taken matters into their own hands, forming youth groups to articulate their rage at a system built against their interests, but also to implement much-needed changes within the school system. By staging walkouts, organizing "read-ins," and mobilizing protests, these student-led organizations dispel unfound notions contesting their readiness to learn. [p. 148]

Many inner-city schools are faced with plights consisting "not just [of]... inadequate education," but of "persistent, pervasive, all-encompassing segregation and severe economic inequalities." [p. 153] If equitable education is to reach as deep into the ghettos and 'hoods, as it does the suburbs, "authority-centralizing, market-based reforms," like [that employed](#) by Harvard economist, Roland Fryer, must be recognized as having very slight "pedagogical advantages." [p. 199]

Education is a "right," the authors assert; a right deserved by every living, breathing child. [p. 212] They conclude that progressive students, educators, activists, thinkers, lecturers, ethicists, clergymen/women, parents, community members, and everyday people must "set up mechanisms that provide real accountability to students - through improved school conditions and shared governance." In this "new civil rights movement," adults would join young people "to ensure an equal education for each and every student." [p. 214] Then, and only then, would schools no longer "suck" for Black and Latino students, who currently function as burden barriers for a segregated education system.

Our Schools Suck jabs the fraudulent education structure with a right hook, but would have dealt a more devastating blow if the students, themselves, the presumed center of this text, were given more time and space to speak censor-free, and without the interjection of the authors. If it's the students doing the *talking back*, then, *in the name of all that is fair*, let them speak, in their own dialect, providing their own context. Let not the experience and expertise of the interviewer-educators disrupt the candid and lucid homilies they are capable of offering. Black and Latino students can speak for themselves, and more strict attention ought to have been paid to that reality. Essays, written by the students, would have made a livelier read. We, the readers, need not be explained to, what the student just said, or what he/she was trying to say.

The book also serves a disservice with its fetishization of, if not borderline obsession with, know-nothing, dry-mouthed, conservative culture-warriors like Bill Cosby, Juan Williams, Orlando Patterson, John McWhorter and Herman Badillo. If there's anything young Black and Brown students should know about these characters, it is that their role is absolutely irrelevant, in the discourse of progressive pedagogical pursuits. Taking a moment, at every philosophical pause, to correct or contest the claims made by those commentators (*from way back when*), makes no sense, in a book ostensibly meant to offer up the concerns of students whose fundamental existence is threatened, not by right-wing drivel, but by systemic-structural barricades placed before their road to glory.

In spite of these shortcomings, I recommend *Our School Sucks* for anyone desperate for a fresh look into the apartheid education system, in which Black and Latino students

are currently trapped:

<http://www.amazon.com/Our-Schools-Suck-Segregated-Education/dp/0814783082>


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