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## ARTICLE

**"The Dog Ate My Homework": *Embracing Risk* in the Chilling Climate of No Excuses Schools**

Alice E. Ginsberg

"Allowing yourself to be uncertain of what will emerge is the threshold we must pass through for new ways of being to take root" (Chaltain, 2010, p. 91).

**Introduction**

I realize that this title is both provocative and potentially very puzzling in the current environment of educational policy and reform. Many would ask: **Haven't we already risked too much?** Indeed, haven't we identified ourselves as an entire *Nation at Risk*, with an increasing number of students labeled *at-risk*?

Almost every day now, headlines in newspapers and magazines from across the country repeatedly decry that our schools are *in crisis*, *failing*, *a recipe for mediocrity*, and, as Education "celebrity" Michele Rhee recently noted *pitiful and getting worse*. Our students are highly at-risk for any number of dangers: not finishing college, being unable to compete for well-paid high level jobs, dropping out of high school, becoming criminals or welfare recipients, being functionally illiterate, or stuck doing math at a second grade level.

Educators, entrepreneurs, and public officials *from across political parties* have warned that we are lagging far behind other countries in both test results and in the *production* of scientists and engineers. They note repeatedly that we must view the deteriorating state of public education in America as a wake-up call and, as Education Secretary Duncan and President Obama have both noted repeatedly in public addresses, we must face the very real danger that "The country that out-educates us today will out-compete us tomorrow."

*Picture: A young white girl with blond hair is seen smiling, sitting upright at her desk, her textbook open as she is obediently raising her hand. In the background she surrounded by an utter wasteland, depicted mostly in shades of grey. There are no other students, no teachers to be found. The all important blackboard lies on the ground by her feet covered in senseless scribbles.*

One need only to look to the poster advertising the 2010 hit documentary *Waiting for Superman* to get a good picture of what is guiding most school reform in this century. It is the rhetoric of *fear* accompanied by the threat of *destruction*.

The movie poster headline reads: "**The fate of our country won't be decided on a battlefield, it will be determined in a classroom**". What's at risk here? Nothing less than our national security, our freedom, our prosperity, our right to exist....

It's thus a fair question to ask why should we even *tolerate* risk in education, much less *embrace* it? Yet, as I will argue herein, there are different ways of defining and looking at the concept of *risk* in education. One is from an inherently *deficit* perspective, described above, that carries with it the fear of imminent *danger*.

This is linked to the idea that we must tightly control everything that goes on in schools and place the maintenance of *order* and standardized knowledge over any kind of critical thinking. The idea that we are being *out-educated*, further reinforces the idea that education is a commodity that is basically bought, sold, stolen, distributed, coveted, won, and/or taken away.

This view of risk has been addressed by the growing popularity of the education ideology *No Excuses*, which I will explore at length in this paper. It is my contention that the rhetoric of No Excuses encourages the pursuit of *individual* power and success at the cost of larger issues of social justice and equity.

I will argue that while such policies presume to be concerned with increasing student achievement for *all* students, upon more careful consideration, it becomes clear that they are primarily concerned with gate-keeping and maintaining the *status quo* of white, middle-class culture. And while the arguments that support it seem to be about the virtues of meritocracy and individual hard work, there is also a strong component of separating, sorting, and marginalizing members of cultural groups that refuse to conform to this *status quo*.

I thus believe that this policy supports very real and oppressive conditions in our schools, including the implicit and explicit enforcement of dominance and assimilation, framed within the perpetuation of highly racist/classist ideologies. No Excuses, schools, for example, seek to *help* students “acquire the knowledge and skills to *never return* to the playgrounds where the guns go off” (emphasis mine; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003, p. 65).

While we want to guide all children to safety, the implicit message here is that those unfortunate children left in the bullet-riddled playground are of nobody’s concern. Again, the emphasis here is on individual advancement, not on social justice. The goal of leading poor and underprivileged students to security is not accompanied by the ethical belief that *somebody* needs to be willing to return to these playgrounds with the intention of bringing new resources and helping to stop the cycle of violence.

By contrast, in my forthcoming book, I suggest another way of looking at *risk* in education which is connected to the ideals of *courage*, *evolution* and *social change* (Ginsberg, 2011). Rather than seeing risk in education solely in terms of something negative, risk is both the means by and the channel through which we experiment with change and innovation, and look for better strategies and solutions.

To *risk* in this alternative paradigm is to refuse to accept the *status quo* and to be brave enough to question injustice and inequities in all facets of society. To *risk* in this framework is to see learning as inseparable from action, and personal responsibility as linked to issues of equity and care for others. Students need to stop thinking of everything they do as a competition and quest for personal advancement, and to find ways to work collaboratively with an ethic of care, respect, and concern for others less fortunate.

More specifically, in this view, *embracing risk* means encouraging students to ask critical – often uncomfortable – questions about the historic discrimination and domination of certain racial and cultural groups within larger *social structures and systems of power*. It suggests that schools, knowledge and education do not exist within a vacuum, and that educational success will not necessarily always be enough to overcome inequities in other parts of American society.

Finally, *embracing risk* means that students are constantly reflecting upon what they are doing in school with the understanding that knowledge goes beyond memorization of basic skills; it is deeply entwined with matters of context, perception, and yes, *politics*. In other words, it’s not just *what* we know, it’s how we know it, why we believe it to be relevant, and how we are prepared to *use it* in practice.

In the wise words of Sam Chaltain, Director of the Forum for Education and Democracy: “Instead of getting people to ‘buy into’ something, we should be creating opportunities for people to discover what matters to them and then follow the meaning. We should evoke contribution through freedom, not conformity” (2010, p. 63).

Chaltain’s sentiments are strongly echoed by world-renown educator, philosopher and activist Paulo Freire, who likewise suggests “to teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge” (Freire, 1998, p. 30). Freire further notes that “...one of the necessary requirements for correct thinking is a capacity for not being overly convinced of one’s own certitude” (1998, p. 34).

Students, then, must consider that not all solutions work equally well in all contexts and for all stakeholder groups, and to be mindful that these contexts and stakeholder groups are continually changing. They thus have a responsibility to continually consider alternative perspectives, suggestions, sources and resources. As visionary Philadelphia high school Principal Christopher Lehmann<sup>[1]</sup> always asks his students to think about: “What is the worst consequence of your best idea?” In other words, history is neither pre-determined nor stagnant. We must always be open to changing circumstances.

*I will argue herein that, framed in this way, to embrace risk in education does not promote chaos and national insecurity, but rather is a prerequisite for strengthening and sustaining democracy.*

### **No Excuses: Sounds like high standards, but what does this mandate really mean?**

As part of my current research, I have been randomly scanning the mission statements on public school websites across the country. My intent is to better understand their definitions and ideologies of quality education and student achievement in the highly politicized climate of *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top*.<sup>[2]</sup> Across websites from vastly different schools -- of different grade levels, sizes, student demographics, funding levels, facilities and geographies -- one of the phrases that have become increasingly common is No Excuses.

Sometimes schools are more specific: "*No Excuses for Failure*," or "*Excellence. No Excuses*." In fact, there are many variations on the No Excuses theme, but the general idea is the same. No Excuses is premised on the idea that we all make our own destinies; that we all have the power to overcome inequality through hard work and pure determination.

In other words, the term No Excuses has been embraced by many as a positive metaphor for making sure that *all* children are held to high standards and afforded the same opportunities to excel -- regardless of race, class, gender, and other factors that result in labeling many students as at-risk. On the surface, this sounds like an argument for increasing equity and social justice -- both critically important in sustaining American's democratic values and ideals.

Yet there is something about the word *excuses* that is very troublesome. Excuses are generally thought of as reasons people use to *rationalize* or *get out of* doing something wrong. Excuses are usually, though not always, thought of as something an individual uses to avoid being in trouble or having to take responsibility for his or her own actions. They are often based on downright "lies." The classic educational excuse, "The dog ate my homework," comes to mind here.

Thus, when we boldly proclaim that we will not tolerate any excuses for school failure, we suggest that the deeply embedded institutions that both support and produce inequality, discrimination, and cultural dominance are not *real* or *substantial* structural barriers to the success of under-privileged students. No Excuses suggests, as I will soon describe in greater detail, that for students who are so-motivated to succeed, *any door is open to them at any time they commit themselves to walking through it*.

This ideology is maintained despite a growing body of historical evidence that has documented how across the world we have repeatedly (and sometime brutally) marginalized, silenced, obliterated, enslaved, and imprisoned members of society for any number of differences, opposing perspectives, or so-called transgressions.

The crux of the No Excuses philosophy is perhaps best described in Thernstrom's and Thernstrom's book *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*<sup>[3]</sup>. To be fair, the authors begin the book with the conviction that "...racial inequality is America's great unfinished business, the wound that remains unhealed," and further that the "central civil rights issue of our time," is "our failure to provide first-class education for black and Hispanic students...." (p. 1). Sounds promising....

From there the book goes in a totally unexpected direction, however. The entire book seems to repeat the message that "There is no learning without order in the classroom" (p. 50), and that most American public schools have become akin to the Wild West (2003, p. 55), where students "defy" and teachers "succumb" (p. 64). African American children, in particular, are singled out as "less ready to conform to behavioral demands" -- ostensibly because they watch too much television (p. 5).

Thernstrom and Thernstrom contend that good schools "aim to transform the culture of their students..." (p.4) and continually stress their belief that "facts are good" (p.63). No Excuses leaders stress that there are no "second chances" (p. 75). They have eliminated warnings and "hand-wringing" (p. 58). In other words, rather than look critically at the institutions and systems which create and sustain inequality across cultures and that often claim or distort facts to be used to their advantage, the book argues that good schools teach students to respect and honor these institutions -- indeed, to aspire to become part of them.

Thernstrom and Thernstrom state very clearly what is needed: "Students need to acquire the *culture of success*" (emphasis mine; p. 79). To put this in more concrete terms, consider, for example, the authors' praise for one teacher who "does not ask inner-city questions; he wants [students] to know what a golf course looks like" (p. 60).

This goes way beyond the compelling argument made by Lisa Delpit that we need to teach marginalized youth the skills, vocabulary and *codes of power*. In her book, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (1995), Delpit suggests that we need to teach the codes of power as realistic and practical measures to help students enter into positions of power so that they can *fundamentally change* these systems.

According to Delpit, "[T]o act as if power does not exist is to ensure that the power status quo remains the same (p. 39)," and further that "while students are assisted in learning the culture of power, they must also be helped to learn about the arbitrariness of those codes and about the power relationships they represent" (p. 45).

By contrast, the ideology of No Excuses carries the (not so implicit) threat that if we allow students to ask critical questions about social justice, truth, and the American Way, to express their cultural heritage or individuality, or to defy authority in any way, we are opening Pandora's box. Encouraging students to collectively fight for social justice rather

than to obediently climb the ladder of *individual* success is admonished. The goal here is for individual students to get out of the ghetto by denouncing it, and not look back.

At one point, for example, Thernstrom and Thernstrom praise a teacher who, when he takes his students on trips, makes sure that “they stay at *good* hotels and eat at *good* restaurants” (emphasis mine; p. 74)<sup>[4]</sup>. The point is to help inner city students understand that when they “look out their windows and see burning buildings...that there is more to life than just what’s outside the window” (p. 74).

This is not in itself a bad message, yet, like the metaphor of the playground, it is very incomplete. Thernstrom and Thernstrom believe in sending an “optimistic message about America, and about the rules that govern social mobility – the climb out of poverty to greater affluence” (p. 74). They say nothing, however, about systemic poverty and how poor neighborhoods might become transformed by those students willing to return to them, to commit to them, to remember, to document, to fight for, and to honor them.

At No Excuses schools, the general message appears to be that transgression is the equivalent of being what they call “pessimistic,” and, as Thernstrom and Thernstrom sternly note, “Pessimism is a self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 7). The authors praise schools in which under-privileged students and their families are “willing” to work hard, to follow the rules at all times without question, to tightly control what they say and to accept punishment for “wrong answers.” They liken this to what they believe is a “middle class value,” that of “taking responsibility” (p. 65).<sup>[5]</sup> Yet this responsibility is very self-centered; there is little said about taking responsibility for helping others.

It is true that many of the schools that Thernstrom and Thernstrom “celebrate”<sup>[6]</sup> in their book -- like the well-publicized Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) Charter Schools -- seem to encourage some kind of teamwork. But, as described by Thernstrom and Thernstrom, it appears that this only works if you are playing for the right team, following the rules (no matter how arbitrary) and aiming for the same prize -- e.g., becoming part of the “dominant culture” (p. 79).

Perhaps most importantly, students must be willing to be publically humiliated if they, oh say, dare to wear “large hoop earrings,” embrace “hip-hop styles,” and use an “inner city walk” (p. 79). As one school leader asserts: “If you cannot live by our rules, if you cannot adapt to this place, I can show you the back door”<sup>[7]</sup> (p. 49).

In fact, Thernstrom and Thernstrom commend schools where students are required to *chant*, daily, in unison, that they can become “the master of their own destiny [sic]!” (p. 7). The authors further note that successful schools send students this explicit message: “Stick with us and the world is something you can own” (p. 64). I must note here that the use of the term *master*, along with the ideal of *ownership*, are very unfortunate choices for multiple reasons, including a long history of colonialism, slavery, racism and sexism that is undeniably part of this country’s legacy.

On the other hand, the use of the words *master* and *own* seems to accurately reflect the goals of No Excuses education. These goals are to gain personal power and wealth primarily through assimilation, displaying blind obedience to a greater authority (which in some cases is a teacher, and in others, God himself). If you digress, you must be willing to wear the *scarlet letter* of public humiliation and shame – in the case of KIPP schools, an inside-out t-shirt. KIPP students who don’t follow the rules must be willing to become “social isolates” and to be “separated from their *all important* peer group” (emphasis mine; p. 57).<sup>[8]</sup>

In another example, Thernstrom and Thernstrom relate a story of a school co-founder who called “an emergency meeting of the student body” because a student had penciled a “rather benign four-letter word” on the hallway. Rather than using respectful language that opens the door to dialogue as to why everyone has a stake in keeping the building safe and clean, the co-founder instead “shouted” to the crowd: “Somebody here does not belong with the rest of us. Somebody here wants to live amidst trash” (p. 67). This kind of language is presumably all right in the world of No Excuses because, “Making a big deal over small infractions prevents larger problems from happening” (p. 67).

At No Excuses schools students are likewise warned to avoid “wasting time,” to embrace “Wall Street” hours and values (p. 55), to accept punishment without due process because “understanding who’s in charge...is...integral to a good education” (p. 69). Perhaps most frighteningly, students at many No Excuses schools must publically apologize to a larger group when any “core value has been violated, when behavioral expectations have not been meet – including the expectation of arriving at school on time” (p. 68). In this scenario, any and every explanation boils down to an excuse, and any excuse boils down to a lack of personal commitment and responsibility.<sup>[9]</sup>

In the world of No Excuses, students are told to believe that they can achieve whatever they want based solely on

determination, willingness, and the choice to pursue it. In the first few chapters alone, Thernstrom and Thernstrom's book is riddled with platitudes; it is beyond the scope of this paper to address the contradictions and fallacies inherent in much of the book's language, however, some demand comment:

- **"There are No Shortcuts on the road to success"** (p. 74-75 ) Haven't we documented hundreds of cases in which people obtain wealth, power and privilege merely by being in the right place at the right time, or by having the right connections, money, resources and other leverage to get what they want?
- **"You can't argue your way into privilege"** (p. 75). Ever heard of the Supreme Court? Free speech? How does redistribution of power and social change occur if not through freedom of speech and the courage of the oppressed to refuse to remain silent? Looked at from the other extreme, most students know that some voices count for a lot more than others when it comes to distributing privileges, and those voices that hold the most power and sway are often based on arbitrary factors like age or leverage.
- **"The road to success is not paved with excuses. Or second chances"** (p. 75). Don't we have countless examples in history where civil rights groups have organized and then re-organized, lost rights which they fought hard to obtain, and then fought to obtain them all over again? If we give up on the idea of second chances, we are essentially sending the message that we cannot learn from or recover from initial defeat.
- **"We want students who, when we say, run through that wall, will run..."** (p. 75). Ever heard of head trauma? (Sorry, but this one is too absurd to address seriously.)
- **"Knowledge provides you with power to get to a better place"** (p. 74). What about when people have the knowledge but are systematically silenced and stripped of their ability to use it as they believe is just? America and other countries have repeatedly used unequal distribution of power to systematically marginalize, silence or even obliterate the wisdom, art, language, traditions, and knowledge of whole cultures.
- **"...kids are learning the rules of the American game – which they choose to join or reject"** (p. 73). First of all, choosing to accept "the rules of the American game" does not necessarily mean that America will play fair. In other words, minorities will not automatically be given equal opportunity in applying for jobs, even if they are equally qualified. Moreover, it might be helpful to note here that this choice does not have to be so black and white (no pun intended). There is another option here beside simply accepting or rejecting: *We can seek to change the rules of the game.*
- **"God wants you to be organized"** (p. 70). This one is also so absurd, I'm not sure how to respond, except to say, how do we know this, and why does God care so much about organization over other important personal values such as peace, patience and compassion?
- **"Public schools normally waste the most astonishing amount of potential instructional time...marking time while someone yaks over the public address system...making holiday decorations for days, attending assemblies of no instructional use...."** (p. 54-55). This one is packed tight:
  1. The very choice here of the word *yak* suggests that attempts to share and disperse information relevant to the school community are inherently worthless.
  2. Making holiday decorations might also be called art, freedom of expression, and pride in cultural accomplishments and treasures.
  3. Not all community meetings (e.g., assemblies) must be of direct "instructional use" in one of the tested academic disciplines; sometimes people need to come together to engage in important discussions about topics such as bullying, self-esteem, cultural diversity, equity, civility, citizenship, and community development.
- **"When it comes to academic success, members of some ethnic and racial groups are culturally luckier than others.... The explanation: family expectations"** (p. 4-5). I think it fair to say that the word *lucky* as it is used here is actually a synonym for dominant. It is not luck that explains why white men were the masters and black men were the slaves. And it is utterly insulting and an oversimplification to suggest that in some cultural groups,

families simply do not care about their children's futures. This may be expressed in different ways in different cultures, but all cultural groups care deeply about the fate of the next generation.

- “...**dysfunctional families are no excuse for widespread chronic failure**” (p. 43). Just because all families do not look the same, or because some families suffer greater hardships than others, does not necessarily make them dysfunctional.<sup>[10]</sup> Many so-called dysfunctional families are actually extremely resourceful and hardworking.

In sum, America clearly has not yet realized our democratic ideals of complete equality, freedom, and opportunity. Our education system, like many of our social systems (e.g., health care, housing, and employment) still functions on vastly unequal levels of funding and resources, access, power and privilege. The doors that are supposedly always open to everyone, are, in actuality, sometimes tightly locked, and sometimes, quite frankly, do not exist at all.

While, of course, we want to encourage all students to be motivated, successful and to achieve at high levels, there are other ways to achieve this that do not depend on false promises, or on complete uniformity and obedience. As I argue in the final part of this paper, this alternative approach may be thought of as *embracing risk* because it allows, no it *encourages*, students to engage in critical thinking, and respectful debate. These students can question authority, attempt to change the rules, and even “use clothes as a means of self-expression,” (a no-no in the *No Excuses* schools; p. 69).

We need to acknowledge, however, that to genuinely pursue this alternative vision of success could have some serious consequences. If we allow and/or encourage students to ask critical questions about what kinds of knowledge and perspectives are taught and valued; what kinds of cultural assumptions and norms are respected and dominant; and whether systems of power and privilege are, in fact, always fairly earned, and distributed, *we might not like what they discover*.

As the final part of this paper will explore, there is a risk involved in this alternative model of teaching and learning. And a very real part of what we are risking when we *embrace risk* in education is not the risk of chaos, but that those who have benefited from uncontested power and privilege may have to share what they have more equitably. What we are risking is the continuation of the *status quo*.

## Embracing Risk in Education

The view of risk that I am embracing, and that I encourage schools to embrace, is best expressed by progressive educators and activists such as John Dewey, who almost a century ago first stated that “all thinking requires a risk” and that “*acquiring is secondary, and instrumental to the act of inquiring*” (Dewey, 1916/2005, p. 162). The view of risk that I am embracing is one in which teaching and learning are messy and inherently *unfinished* processes that depend on being able to use knowledge obtained in one context when that context changes – as it most certainly will.

In direct opposition to the idea of *No Excuses*, students cannot be afraid to voice and defend their opinions, or, for that matter, to change their opinions, or seek to change the opinions of others. Students must likewise have opportunities to learn in contexts that go beyond sitting in rows and copying down what the teacher dictates. They need opportunities to work together in varying positions of leadership so that they can learn the critical skills of inquiry and skepticism, active listening, respectful debate, and meaningful reflection.

Encouraging students to be potential leaders and to join forces -- both in the school itself, and in their surrounding communities and cultures -- means that schools need to encourage opportunities to link learning with *action* as opposed to simply *recall*. Facts and skills cannot be fully understood if they are completely de-contextualized; students must consider the larger historical contexts.

The consequences of our actions that are included in the *No Excuses* philosophy of learning are strictly personal: It is primarily about individual achievement, success and wealth. The consequences of our actions signified in the idea of *embracing risk*, on the other hand, are that our actions always in some way profoundly impact other people.

Maxine Greene writes in the *Dialectic of Freedom*

To be something other than an object, a cipher, a thing, such a person must... must engage directly with what stands against him/her, no matter what the risk...it is partly a matter of being able to envision things as if they could be otherwise, or of positing alternatives to mere passivity. It should remind us of the relationship between

freedom and the consciousness of possibility, between freedom and the imagination – the ability to make present what is absent, to summon up a condition that is not yet (1988, p. 11/16).

Rather than try to gloss over tragic historical events and inequities with platitudes such as “You can’t argue your way to privilege, you’ve got to earn it,” Greene suggests that “arguing,” is often the only way that real change can occur. In *The Dialectic of Freedom*, Greene continues: “Tragedy...discloses and *challenges*; often, it provides images of men and women on the verge. We may have reached a moment in our history when teaching and learning, if they are to happen meaningfully, must happen on the verge” (p.23).

Greene’s idea of teaching and learning *on the verge* is very similar to what I call *embracing risk* in education. In both cases, the underlying principle is that schools need to be places where students can question authority and become genuine leaders. Questioning authority includes contesting the belief that certain information is the truth, regardless of context, perspective, or *politics*.

It also includes questioning the authority of select individuals to dictate proper or acceptable behavior, and of select cultural groups to dominate what counts as positive and significant. (In other words, what’s so inherently bad about hoop earrings?). In a real democracy, there can be more than one culture of success, just as there is inherently more than one culture.

Moreover, it seems clear that when standardized test scores become the supreme measure of educational success, as is a large part of both *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top*, we make it harder and harder for both teachers and students to *embrace risk* as part of learning. By this I mean that when progress is based on one-shot, timed opportunities to demonstrate quantity of knowledge recalled, we severely limit not only what we teach, but how we teach it. It has been well documented that in an effort to teach to the test, we end up limiting opportunities for students to engage in learning that allows them to experiment, innovate, collaborate, critically questions, and reflect.

It also must be noted that when basic skills in *but two* subjects -- math and reading – become the measure of adequate yearly progress, we marginalize not only all the other subjects that students need to learn (e.g., social studies, science, art, to name a few...), but also opportunities for interdisciplinary and project-based learning. Multiple choice does not prepare students to identify and address real-world problems, problems with answers that cannot be reduced to the process of simple elimination. Oftentimes we must choose between the lesser of two evils, actively look for new sources or resources, or consider an entirely unmarked, unexplored option or direction.

Finally, as Christopher Robbins suggests in his extraordinary book *Expelling Hope: The Assault on Youth and the Militarization of Schooling* (2008), when we design public schools to be places where obedience and order are paramount, we do not in fact encourage personal responsibility, we diminish it. According to Robbins: “Being deprived of the vocabularies and material conditions, people have little impetus to translate private problems and interests into social issues and commitments” (p. 85). Robbins further underscores that in this context, “students already placed at risk are seen as risks to teacher competency evaluations and school funding” (2008, p.161).

Similar to Greene’s idea of “teaching and learning on the verge,” Robbins believes that “[h]ope inherently has a critical edge” (p. 168). We are not simply asking students to be pessimistic and negative when we acknowledge this. As Robbins explains, looking realistically at the future “enables people to identify – and implicitly denounce -- the social relationships and conditions that do violence, in any form, by claiming publically that a different type of human existence is possible and desired” (p. 168).

Yes, *The dog ate my homework* is not a particularly good excuse. Yet not all dissent, debate, reasoning and self-expression should be discounted as an *excuse*. As we continue to *race to the top* we must not forget that, while instilling optimism and hope, we must not let go of that *critical edge*.

Risk can be debilitating, but it can also be liberating. It is always possible to stop and rethink, even when *on the verge* of winning, if this is where we really want to go, why we are going there, and what we will do when we get there. If we change our minds, we are not returning to the same place, but we have created a new path. As Sam Chaltain writes: “...Meaningful learning is risky, difficult, and sometimes, painful. But it’s also sometimes the moment when we first discover what we’re capable of, and why we can never go back.<sup>[11]</sup>”

\*The ideas presented in this paper are excerpted from my forthcoming book, *Embracing Risk in Urban Education* (MD: Rowman & Littlefield). In press - publication scheduled for 2011.



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## Notes

[1] Founder of the Science Leadership Academy (SLA)

[2] In previous articles I have called this the new three R's of education: *Relay Race Reform*, as both titles liken education to a "race." It is my contention that, within this environment where the stakes are extremely high and extremely narrowly defined, schools must equate depth with speed, making meaning with rote memorization, and the concept of achievement with the goal of ultimate victory.

[3] Even though this book was published seven years ago, it is still highly relevant as *No Excuses* schools have become increasingly more popular and more abundant.

[4] The definition of *good* is not open to discussion; it seems to go without saying.

[5] It is extremely classist and, to a certain extent, racist to suggest that personal responsibility is a primarily middle-class value. This kind of thinking reinforces the damaging stereotypes that working class cultures are lazy, and that they support the creation and perpetuation of such stereotypes as *The Welfare Queen*.

[6] Their word choice.

[7] Needless to say, the back door is often where we send people in disgrace. Why not let dissenting students choose to walk out the front door with their head held high?

[8] The reason that I emphasize the words *all important* in this statement is because the authors seem to suggest that the desire to identify with others in your cultural group who share your life experiences is of exaggerated importance. In minority groups especially, it may be a factor in maintaining self-esteem and negotiating survival.

[9] By *contrast*, a student who is late to school because she needs to stay home and watch her sick baby sister while her parents work two jobs to make ends meet might be seen in some contexts as something admirable -- or at least *necessary* -- rather than something that demands a public apology.

[10] At one point, the authors of *No Excuses* actually cite a study that suggests it is more adventitious for children to "have a mother who is able to stay at home full-time" (p. 66). Not only do women of all classes work and still manage to be actively involved in their families, but, in many cultures, father, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and even fictive kin can play a deeply nurturing role in raising children. We need to think carefully before we label families that do not reflect the nuclear norm of the 1950's as dysfunctional.

[11] Original quotation, not previously published.