better teachers in the classroom and remove ineffective ones. Instead, the authors focus on how high-stakes testing and NCLB have encouraged formulaic teaching to the test. As a critic of teaching to the test and some of the perverse incentives created by NCLB, I am sympathetic to their concerns. But some standardized testing is necessary for demonstrating whether schools have fulfilled their basic educational obligations and for acting as a lever for reform and accountability. It is also difficult to see how NCLB is responsible for apathetic or unqualified teachers. The book hints at a potential solution when it mentions the success that KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) schools have often had with disadvantaged students. Unfortunately, while acknowledging the quality and dedication of KIPP teachers (who also labor under NCLB and high-stakes testing), the authors imply that KIPP schools' performance is due to "extra resources" that the schools garner (p. 202). But as largely public charter schools, they receive less funding, often much less, than traditional public schools, and can only try to narrow the gap through fund-raising.

Despite these concerns, Alonso and his colleagues should be commended for dramatically exposing the very real consequences for young people of urban educational failure and the urgent need for reform.

Response to Joshua Dunn's review of *Our Schools Suck: Students Talk Back to a Segregated Nation on the Failures of Urban Education*

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— Gaston Alonso

Joshua Dunn's thoughtful review raises methodological and substantive issues that require clarification. According to Dunn, my coauthors and I "contend" that students' "statements" criticizing their lack of academic drive or that of their peers "show how students have 'internalized' the perspective of scholars such as Patterson." This is evidence, he contends, that we "tend not to treat young people as 'experts' of their lives" when they failed to support our critique of the "culture of failure" thesis. However, we make no such contention. Moreover, his critique misrepresents our ethnographic approach. While researchers who conduct interviews as part of their methods often report statements by public officials and others to support their arguments, as ethnographers we engaged in an interpretative task.

We used multiple methods to arrive at what Clifford Geertz referred to as "actor-oriented" formulations of others' self-interpretations (in *The Interpretation of Cultures,* 1973, p. 14). As described in our "Methodological Appendix" (pp. 215–31), my coauthors spent the 2003–4 school year not just collecting what students said but immersing themselves as participant observers in three sites and conducting document analysis. The variety of data collected helped us see how students' environments and their interactions with others, including us, influenced their self-interpretations. As with all teenagers, some did make statements that could, out of context, be read as evidence of a "culture of failure." That many of the same students *also* criticized their own or others' temporary failings told us that, contrary to what other scholars say, they were not drowning in a culture of failure. Looking at students' multidimensional self-interpretations within the ethnographic context allowed us to understand how those interpretations were influenced by students' awareness of the disjuncture between celebrations of American meritocracy and the structural conditions shaping their lives, as well as between their experiences and the way adults talked about them, rather than by their "internalization" of a scholar's theory.

Dunn suggests that our analysis is driven by "the assumption that the problems of urban education flow from a lack of resources." This is not the case. We document the complex causes of those problems—including the "incompetence and inefficiency" highlighted by Dunn. Stories about incompetence and inefficiency must not obfuscate *intra*district funding inequalities that affect the quantity and quality of resources available at schools. While New York, as Dunn suggests, has "one of the highest per-pupil expenditures in the country," funds are not equally distributed. Schools with the security measures he celebrates—but which many students found detrimental to their school experiences—receive an average of $9,601 per pupil, compared to the $11,282 per-pupil citywide average (p. 198). If we are willing to spend money so that some have access to quality teachers, small classes, and a college preparatory curriculum, then why are we not willing to spend money so that all in the *same* district have access to such resources? Our failure to ensure "that each child can receive an education to fulfill her or his human potential" (p. 209) leads students to give up on their substandard schools and forecloses the academic futures of even the hardest-working students.

Dunn writes that we "do not offer concrete proposals." This, again, is not the case. We propose that No Child Left Behind reauthorization include "school proficiency" as evidenced by "benchmarks that every school has to satisfy," such as "clean and open bathrooms"; classrooms with "working window[s] and adequately regulated temperature," as well as "enough seats and desks for every student"; and access to "science labs, libraries including online resources, and other facilities necessary to complete college preparatory coursework" (pp. 207–12). To dismantle the legal architecture that upholds our segregated and unequal school system—an architecture explored by Dunn in *Complex Justice* and by us (pp. 170–5)—we propose "a federal constitutional amendment establishing a constitutional right to quality education" (p. 212).

Recently, Diane Ravitch noted that her years among policymakers led her to begin, in James Scott's formulation, "seeing like a state"—"looking at schools and teachers

and students from an altitude of 20,000 feet and seeing them as objects to be moved around by big ideas and great plans" (*The Death and Life of the Great American School System,* 2010, p. 10). Political scientists must resist the urge to "see like a state." The value of the ethnographic approach is that it allows us to see what is happening on the ground. To those seduced by the latest "big ideas" of accountability, high-stakes testing, and charter schools—ideas whose outcomes, research suggests, are less clear than supporters hold—our proposals might appear too concrete or too lofty. However, they are what we found is needed if our nation is to ever fulfill the promise of *Brown*.