

#64 Different Strokes for Different Folks?

No excuses-style charter schools, known for rigid discipline and a college prep focus have seen explosive growth in urban areas over the past decade. And supporters of the model point to parent demand as the fuel. According to Eva Moskowitz, CEO and founder of New York City's Success Academy, parents—overwhelmingly Black and Latinx—enroll their kids in no excuses schools because they “believe in strict discipline.” But has anyone ever asked these parents if that's really the case? In the latest episode of Have You Heard, we talk to researchers Mira Debs and Joanne Golann who focus on two very different school models: public Montessori and urban no excuses schools. They talked to parents at both kinds of schools and found remarkably similar views. “Parents from all backgrounds want strong academics AND respect for their children.”

Reading list

Mira Debs, Joanne Golann and Anna Lisa Weiss: [“To Be Strict on Your Own”: Black and Latinx Parents Evaluate Discipline in Urban Choice Schools](#), *American Education Research Journal*, March 2019.

Mira Debs [Diverse Families, Desirable Schools: Public Montessori in the Era of School Choice](#), Harvard University Press, April 2019.

Joanne Golan, [“The Paradox of Success at a No Excuses School.”](#) *Sociology of Education*, January 2015.

[“Holding Back to Get Ahead”](#) an interview with Joanne Golan.

Federico R. Waitoller, Nicole Nguyen & Gia Super, [“The irony of rigor: ‘no-excuses’ charter schools at the intersections of race and disability.”](#) *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, March 2019.

Richard Whitmire, [The Founders: Inside the Revolution to Invent and Reinvent America's Best Charter Schools](#), 2016.

Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom: [No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning](#), 2003.

Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, [Schooling in Capitalist America](#), 1976.

[Startup Podcast](#): Seven part series on Success Academy

[“Montessori Schools: They're Not Just for Rich White Kids Anymore”](#) Have You Heard visits an urban Montessori school in a gentrifying part of Washington DC.

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Jennifer Berkshire: Welcome to Have You Heard, I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Jack Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: And today we are going to be talking about two different school models that on the surface, well couldn't really seem more different public Montessori schools and urban 'no excuses schools.'

Schneider: So the research at the heart of today's episode is really interesting because it investigates parents attitudes towards discipline that I think at least are so often taken for granted in policy dialogues that there are just wide sweeping assumptions about what particular kinds of parents want for their kids. And I think this study does a nice job in terms of challenging some of those assumptions.

Berkshire: Well, we're going to be hearing all about it in just a minute. But first, Jack, I have to ask you a personal question. There is a rumor flying around the Internet that you once attended a Montessori school. Is this true?

Schneider: Well, you know, who knows if it was a orthodox Montessori or not. There isn't really a lot of quality control with regard to whether it is or isn't Montessori despite what's on the sign. But yes, the rumor may be true.

You know, I think something that is interesting and related to that, and I say this as a white person, is that when we're thinking about Montessori schools, I think most people are conjuring images of a bunch of white kids in the classroom. And that when they're picturing no excuses charter schools, they're picturing nonwhite kids in the classroom. And that's another thing that I think is really interesting to consider when we're talking about this research: to what extent are our particular school models racialized? And how are our attitudes about school discipline racialized?

And of course, you know, other forms of identity factor into this as well, right? Particularly social class. But when we're talking about who is going to be educated in a way that is going to afford them lots of room for creativity and is going to be primarily relationship-driven with regard to discipline, and who is going to be in a tightly controlled environment, I think we close our eyes and we picture a very different population groups.

Berkshire: If you're a regular listener to this show, you know that there is nothing we enjoy more than digging into interesting academic research, especially when it disrupt some widely held belief about schools. Mirror Deb's directs the education studies program at Yale and her colleague Joanne Golann is an assistant professor of education and public policy and sociology

at Vanderbilt. They study two very distinct kinds of schools, public Montessori, which is known for its child centered approach and no excuses charter schools known for strict discipline and college prep. The growth of both kinds of schools reflects a key education reform tenant: that different kinds of families want different kinds of schools. But the parents that Debs and Golann talked to really questioned that assumption. Here's Mira Debs.

Mira Debs: Joanne Golann and I first started talking about this project, we were just really intrigued by by the differences in the two sites that we were looking at: public Montessori schools and no excuses charters. And although I had done my research at public Montessori schools, I had been a teacher at a no excuses charter high school. So I was particularly fascinated by Joanne's research. And, you know, I think people tend to think that when parents choose either a public Montessori school or a no excuses charter, they have a very different set of preferences. And so we were really curious to see whether that was actually the case, whether parents had a radically different set of preferences, or whether parents actually were more similar than we might think. And we were specifically interested in the question of discipline because that's an area where the no excuses charters in particular have been critiqued for their very harsh discipline system.

Berkshire: I'm guessing listeners are at least a little familiar with the Montessori brand. As we learned in the intro, our own Jack Schneider briefly attended a Montessori school. But your research is on a subset of Montessori that I'm guessing listeners won't know as much about: public Montessori, break it down for us.

Debs: So public Montessori is really kind of a hidden form of school choice. There are over 500 public Montessori schools around the country. They enroll close to 150,000 students. And there are big clusters of public Montessori schools in cities like Denver, Milwaukee, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Boston has some, Hartford has, um, um, and um, they're notable. They've been around for over 50 years and they're notable for the level of racial diversity in the schools.

Berkshire: I have a little clip that I'm going to play. This is from a Montessori school in Milwaukee, attended by preschoolers and kindergartners.

[Audio clip]

Berkshire: So Mira, it sounds like kids in this Montessori classroom are having a lot of fun. But there's actually a lot more going on. What listeners couldn't see is the sort of hive of industry in the classroom. There's a structure at work here that people probably don't associate with Montessori.

Debs: In my book about public Montessori, which just came out called *Diverse Families, Desirable Schools: Public Montessori in the Era of School Choice*, I talked about how there is a hidden curriculum around discipline that starts with children from a very early age because

children will often begin Montessori schools at the age of three. And so there's a lot of structure that students learn, like how to walk in a straight line. They practice that over and over. They learn how to push in their chair. They learn how to move in the room so they're not disturbing other students' work. They learn how to be quiet. And even taking work and putting away work is part of the beginning and the end of every single lesson.

So all of these kinds of skills and behavior are very explicitly taught. But different from a no excuses school. The outcome is with the intention of giving children as much independence as possible so they have this very structured approach to behavior, but then the ideal is that children will be able to be as independent as possible in the classroom.

Berkshire: If there's a hidden structure at work in Montessori schools, no excuses charter schools have a very explicit structure. I want to bring in Joanne Golann. She knows a thing or two about urban no excuses charters. Joanne did an ethnographic study of a school in the Northeast, which means she didn't just study it from the outside. She embedded there, spending day after day with the students, seeing what no excuses-style discipline looks like through their eyes.

Joanne Golann: Yeah, so this came out of ethnographic work, as you said, being embedded. I was embedded in one no excuses middle school for about 18 months and trying to get a sense of how students experience this very strict sweating the small stuff type of disciplinary system and thinking a lot about what kind of skills are they developing. So the idea is, the idea or the support behind no excuses schools, is that many of these schools are achieving academically. But I was thinking about, well let's think about the kind of social and behavioral side of things. So are these students developing the skills they need to be successful in college in a more flexible environment?

Berkshire: Full disclosure, I am a super fan of Joanne's earlier research. I did an interview with her back in 2016 called holding back to get ahead that you can read on the, have you heard blog, Joanne? One of the arguments that you made after being embedded at a no excuses school was that students complained about how indiscriminate the discipline system was and that the nature of the system meant that they couldn't protest, even if they hadn't done the thing that they were being punished for. I'm curious about how the parents you talk to in your new research perceived this aspect of no excuses.

Golann: It was interesting to hear parents also feeling like they were being disciplined, just as their children were, because parents hear about these practices and see the impacts of these practices on their children. One example we have in the paper that resonated with me was one parent who—the parents get called a lot, you know, by school teachers is for student behaviors. But you know, in a typical school, a parent might get called if your student, you know, gets into a fight, but in this school they get called for very small things. So this parent tells us how she was called, you know, because her daughter was humming during a fire drill and she's saying 'it was a nice day,' you know, 'they were cooped up all day, she was happy she was humming.' Or

another case for laughing or something like that. So, yeah, feeling frustrated that they're being called for things that, you know, they think the school or the teachers should be able to handle and that these aren't serious misbehaviors.

Berkshire: So Jack, I want to bring you back in. We were talking about two very distinct kinds of schools, Montessori and no excuses. And I would bet that people are probably more familiar with the origin story of the first than the second.

Schneider: Jennifer, I'm thinking of a conversation that you and I had some time ago about where the phrase 'no excuses' comes from. You know, this is a phrase that is often deployed to describe particular kinds of schools, especially in the charter sector. And it's a phrase that has a history. It comes from someplace. And the origin at least as far as I'm able to determine is a 2004 book by the Thernstroms, a husband and wife team. And the title of the book is *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*. In the book the authors are describing an approach to schooling that they have not come up with. But they're identifying a kind of common theme here, which is a kind of militant attention to detail in terms of student conduct and behavior, what they describe as broken windows theory applied to the behavior of students in school.

Berkshire: So I knew about this book but I'd never read it until I was preparing for this episode. And what was so fascinating to me is just how explicit the authors are about what these schools are supposed to do. At one point they describe KIPP as acting like the employer that the kids are going to have some day. And KIPP is not the only familiar name in the book. Achievement First, Northstar, which was the first school in the Uncommon Schools network. They're all in here.

Schneider: What they really appreciate about the schools is that these schools are actively disrupting the kinds of conduct and behavior that students have learned in their neighborhoods. This is important to point out because the kinds of approaches that are now engendering some blow back at some of these quote unquote no excuses schools. These practices are not bugs, right? These are features and these are features that were baked in at the beginning and that we're really appreciated and valued by some of the champions of these kinds of schools. That the people who have supported the expansion of some of these no excuses charter networks have in many cases been drawn to the very features that are now eliciting some public questioning and concern with regard to whether or not these practices are colonial in nature, whether or not they are actually harmful to young people, whatever the test scores associated with them are.

Berkshire: Mira Debs: One of the arguments you often hear is that the growth of no excuses charters has been fueled by the demand of black and Latinx parents for this strict school culture. Eva Moskowitz, who I'm sure our listeners are familiar with—she's the founder and CEO of Success Academies in New York City. She said that her charters are in high demand because the family's applying "believe in stricter discipline." You're doubtful about that claim.

Debs: I was recently listening to the six part podcast on Startup about Success Academy and it's really striking as you listen to that, you know, how much of the no excuses discipline model is not about what's necessarily good for kids, but it's about the desire of a charter chain to grow at warp speed and to have something that they can essentially hand over to relatively untrained teachers. And so, you know, I think we're at a really important moment of reckoning in terms of educators saying, 'is this the best that we can do for kids or are we doing this because of what our staffing model looks like? And if we want to do the best things for kids how does our staffing model need to change?'

Berkshire: I'll include a link to the startup podcast with the reading list that we do for this show, but for listeners who may not have heard it, Mira, I want you to explain what you mean by the connection between the discipline structure and these no excuses schools and who teaches in them.

Debs: A lot of the no excuses charters have been set up, you know, to use a really young cohort of teachers move through every couple of years. When I was teaching at the Match school in Boston, which was at the time very proudly calling itself a no excuses charter, another friend of mine who taught at a no excuses school said that staff said to her, 'we're happy if we get two to three good years out of you.' So the assumption is that you have this core of untrained teachers coming through and moving very rapidly out. And so this disciplinary curriculum is something that they hand to them, it's uniform. But the rationale is not that it's being done because it's best for kids.

Berkshire: Your research with Joanne Golann focused on parent attitudes towards two very different kinds of schools: no excuses and Montessori. And yet you found a lot of overlap in terms of what parents said they wanted.

Debs: People want their children to be academically successful, but they also want, you know, so much more for their children and they want them to develop into autonomous and happy adults. And one of the things that was really striking when I interviewed black and Latinx parents at the Montessori schools was they repeatedly talked about how happy their kids were and that that was something that was really important and valuable for them.

Berkshire: This assumption that different kinds of families want different kinds of schools is really a central premise of our whole education reform debate down to how the schools themselves communicate with parents.

Debs: I've observed this to happen both at no excuses charters and public Montessori schools. So the no excuses charters will often say to parents, you know, we don't want you to come to the school unless you're going to do x, y, and z and you're going to show up for this and you're going to show up for this. So there's a lot of expectations that are placed on o families and, you know, if a school is a public school, anyone should be able to enroll there. And in the Montessori

schools, sometimes that gets communicated to families as 'you should come to our school if you got value education for the whole child and if you want your child to be socially, socially and emotionally nurtured.' Yes, those things are important. But there are also parents who need reassurance that their kids are going to be academically on track.

And so sometimes, if a progressive or a Montessori school won't even speak to that, they're unintentionally steering away families who want to make sure first and foremost that their kids are going to be academically on track to be successful. One detail that I share is that, you know, I looked through every single public Montessori website in the course of of helping to compile a public Montessori census. And I only came across one or two schools that advertised a college prep curriculum, whereas I think almost every single no excuses school talks about college prep all the time. They have college pendants up around the school. That's a huge part of the ethos of the schools, about no excuses schools.

Berkshire: Joanne: You study and write about no excuses schools. I think it's fair to say that a moment of reckoning has arrived for this approach. Just in the last year we've seen student protest against strict disciplinary practices at the Noble Charter Network in Chicago at achievement first and new haven at success academy in New York City. I'm curious about where you see this going.

Golann: Like you said, there are a lot of efforts, at least in name, about changing disciplinary practices at these schools to be more positive, more responsive, more relationship focused. So a lot of these schools are now embracing things like restorative justice. I say whether in name or or substantively changing your practice because I think that's not always clear, right? I think a lot of these reforms can be symbolic. That's not because the schools don't want to change, but I think it's hard to change. A relationship based approach may not fit with the no excuses model, which is very, you know, about maximizing school time, producing this sense of urgency and really focused on academic achievement and test scores. So I think it's hard to move from a model like that to a restorative discipline model for example. So I think there's still, I would say an uphill climb to really, really seeing changes in these school discipline practices. I think it's possible and there are schools who have been doing it, you know, for longer, um, month, year periods of time where, um, where we are seeing real changes on the ground.

Berkshire: That was Mira Debs and Joanne Golann. They are the authors, with Annalisa Weiss "To Be Strict on Your Own": Black and Latinx Parents Evaluate Discipline in Urban Choice Schools that appeared in the American Educational Research Journal back in March. And Jack and I will be right back to wrap things up and to give you a little preview of this episode's edition of In the Weeds.

[Music]

Berkshire: So Jack, I want to go back to that book you talked about earlier that coined the term no excuses. There was a story recently in the *Boston Globe* about parents objecting to this strict

and seemingly arbitrary discipline practices at Roxbury Prep and Boston. And there was a quote from a parent whose daughter kept getting suspended, including for showing up to take a test without wearing the dress shoes that the school requires. And that's exactly the sort of broken windows idea that those conservative race scholars you mentioned the thirds drums were enthusiastic about and the girl's mom told the *Boston Globe*, you know, we're really hoping that this school is going to get her to college, but they seem awfully focused on the uniform.

Schneider: Yeah, I think that what this speaks to is a kind of lack of engagement with people, with parents in plain language, right? That, you know, it can seem as if plain language is being used to ask parents, you know, how do you feel about discipline, for instance? Uh, well, parents generally speaking, are in favor of discipline. But how are we defining this? Are we talking about somebody who is disciplined in the sense of a personality characteristic? You, Jennifer are a self-disciplined person. You sit down to work on the podcast and I am somebody who needs to be disciplined, right? So I am a disciplined person.

Berkshire: We're learning a lot about you today, Jack.

Schneider: When you're sitting next to me and giving me a hard time for not having finished my show notes. So this is an example of how a word and even a phrase can mean something different depending on how you're interpreting it, right? Do you want students to be disciplined? Yes I do. But I want the locus of control to be within the student, right? Not outside of the student. I don't want my daughter to be controlled in school. I want her to develop her own sense of control. And this is just one example of how it's really important to actually engage the public and the many publics in fact that exist in public education in a conversation about what they want schools to do rather than to assume sort of generally across population groups, what parents want or to pitch them a sort of a loaded version of what a school's mission might be. A without unpacking it with them, uh, to, to talk through what all of the various consequences might be of a particular approach to schooling. So I just think this is a really interesting case of how we fail repeatedly in public education to truly engage the public.

Berkshire: Well, I want to ask you about that because people who listen to this show may know that you have sort of an interesting side gig—we did an episode about it maybe like 18 months ago—that you spend time in schools engaging parents, teachers and other, I'm gonna use the word stakeholders and all, you know, you're focused on trying to develop a measure of school quality that more accurately reflects what people care about. And I would imagine that discipline would be something that people have strong feelings about. So I'm curious how the measures that you're taking stack up against what Mira and Joanne who we were just talking to found out in their research.

Schneider: We haven't really seen tremendous discrepancies across subgroups in terms of what they value in schools. We've seen a lot of agreement actually across language groups, ethnic groups, across gender, across income groups. Now granted this is all within Massachusetts. So our group is the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education

Assessment. We work with districts that are pretty diverse but which are all here in the state. That said, we see, you know, really tremendous agreement. And I think one of the things that speaks to is the fact that in a lot of these approaches to discipline, you see unstated beliefs about the kinds of jobs and lives young people will have and live, you know, are they going to be following orders or are they going to be working autonomously in a collaborative environment? I think that much of the way we perceive young people and their futures is racialized and it is shaped by our views of social class and certainly gender and other forms of identity enter into this. And so when policy leaders are making assumptions about what particular groups want for their children rather than perhaps talking with them, you know, it's always possible if not probable, that these identity factors like race, ethnicity, language, family income, are shaping the way that the assumptions are developing about what parents want. Right? That low income African American parents must want their children to be strictly disciplined so that they can avoid particular kinds of fates or be prepared for particular kinds of destinies. It may be true in some cases, but it also may not be true in a lot of cases.

Berkshire: So Jack, you just gave me a great idea and I know that I have promised to be more disciplined about this, but I have something I want to spring on you for our next in the weeds topic.

Schneider: I'm seeing a red flicker in your eyes.

Berkshire: Oh, it's red all right. What would you think if we took a book with us into the weeds and that book is *Schooling in Capitalist America*?

Schneider: Oh, Bowles and Gintis, that's a classic. I'm in.

Berkshire: As our regular listeners know, at the end of every episode, we venture into a special place that we like to call In the Weeds.

Schneider: I wanted it to be called Jack's clubhouse, but I think the two are synonymous.

Berkshire: Something like that. So if you are a supporter of ours on Patreon or you'd like to be, all you have to do is go to [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com) search for Have You Heard and you'll find all the cool ways that you can support us. Give us a little money every month. You get cool benefits like a reading list and the opportunity to hear us hold forth in an unscripted way on some topic of interest. And today we're going to be talking about a book that Jack and I are both, what Jack?

Schneider: Brimming with excitement to discuss.

Berkshire: And that book is called *Schooling in Capitalist America*.

Schneider: And I'm just going to say, I think that Bowles and Gintis are at the Santa Fe Institute for geniuses or whatever it's called. So in case people are scared off by that title, these people are like, you know, certified brainiacs.

Berkshire: No one has invited us to come to Santa Fe, have they?

Schneider: Maybe I didn't get a plus one on mine. We may be podcasting in capitalist America but there are of course other ways to support the show. Perhaps the best is to tell your friends and colleagues about us. Nothing makes us happier than growing our listening audience. And another way to support the show is by going on iTunes or Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts and giving us a rating, preferably a five star rating. That only helps us gain visibility.

Berkshire: Thank you, Jack. And thanks to all of you for listening and supporting the show in whatever way you can. And we'll be back in two weeks with another outstanding episode. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.