

“No one wins. One side just loses more slowly.”

Schooling, Standardization, and Inequality through the Lens of *The Wire*

An honors thesis for the Program in American Studies

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“Thanks for bein’ straight on this.” — Nick Sobotka

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ii
Introduction	1
Literature Review	10
Historical Context.....	20
The Rise of School Standardization.....	20
<i>The Wire</i> and the Television Landscape.....	24
Urban Growth and Decay	30
Theoretical Framework.....	36
1. School Policy	43
High-stakes Testing.....	43
Tracking.....	51
2. Power Dynamics	56
Accountability and Top-Down Control.....	56
School as Prison	60
Black/White Divide	64
3. Student Engagement	69
Inclusive Classrooms.....	69
Racialized Exclusion	75
Alternative Learning Environments	79
Conclusion	82
Bibliography	89

INTRODUCTION

“You start to tell the story, you think you’re the hero, and then when you get done talking...”

— *McNulty*

I think the idea we’re trying to bring across is that kids are going to get educated. And that we’re going to see where. It’s not about kids making bad mistakes and becoming caught in the Criminal Justice system. They don’t have an option of choice. We in society have the choices. So you might see a kid who clearly doesn’t have a prayer and it will be very apparent why he doesn’t have a prayer. It’s not about blaming the kids. They will survive. They will learn. It’s just a question of where. — *Ed Burns, co-creator of The Wire (HBO)*

According to the democratic ideals of the United States, school is “the great equalizer” (MacLeod 11). Students from all walks of life are, in theory, given the same educational opportunities, and thus, “schooling renders social inequality superfluous” (MacLeod 11). What is often ignored in popular rhetoric, though, is the deep inequality built into schools at an institutional level. The fact that children born into working-class families often end up in the working class themselves, while middle- and upper-class children tend to remain there, is no accident. According to sociologists, schools are one of the main factors in this social reproduction, and reproduction theorists argue “that schools actually reinforce social inequality while pretending to do the opposite” (MacLeod 11). Although we as a society like to believe that all students have an equal opportunity to learn and succeed, and frequently lament the failure of inner-city schools, the reality is that public education in America systematically advantages some

and disadvantages others. Schools simply *cannot* educate all of their students, for a capitalist society requires social class inequities and the perpetual existence of a working class to function.

There is, then, an important difference to make between “schooling” and “education.” Critical pedagogy scholar Peter McLaren describes the distinction, put forth by such theorists as Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux: schooling “is primarily a mode of social control,” while education “has the potential to transform society, with the learner functioning as an active subject committed to self and social transformation” (191-2). Therefore, the U.S. education system as it currently exists is much more of a *schooling* system. Not enough students are learning modes of thought that promote widespread success and meaningful change. Many learn basic skills, like reading and math, but for the most part, knowledge is based around obedience and the status quo that reifies the system. And really, that is the goal of schools: to control the flow of knowledge so as not to result in any radical societal change, but to allow just enough exceptions to climb the social ladder and “make it,” to use as proof of the efficacy of the system as a whole.

Over the past several decades, there has been growing discontent with the U.S. public education system. Although it has rarely been framed theoretically, scholars, politicians, and policymakers alike have agreed that the education system is flawed and requires an overhaul in order to truly provide an equal education to all Americans. Discussion of the “achievement gap” between Black and White students’ standardized test scores dominates media coverage of education, and reformers have grown more and more eager to bring change to schools. During the past ten years in particular, this discontent has been transformed into action: specifically, a standards-based reform movement designed to raise educational standards and to hold schools, students, and teachers accountable.

The No Child Left Behind legislation, signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2001, epitomizes standards-based reform and accountability. Under the law, states are required to institute curriculum standards, measure them with standardized tests, and impose sanctions on those schools that are not performing highly enough: “No Child Left Behind—or NCLB—changed the nature of public schooling across the nation by making standardized test scores the primary measure of school quality” (Ravitch 15). The standardized, top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to school reform rendered numerical test scores more important than any actual knowledge or curriculum.

There is an important distinction to make, however, between “standards” and “standardization” or “standards-based reform.” As we will see, many scholars and educators have criticized the current reform movement for its reliance on data-driven accountability, but few have suggested that educational standards are the problem. “Standards” simply mean guidelines for what we believe students should know and learn in the classroom. Deborah Meier, a long-time educator and leading member of the “small schools” movement, argues that individual schools should set their own standards “with an eye to what the world out there expects and what we deem valuable and important” (“Will Standards Save” 21). Different school leaders will have different ideas about what specific standards should be, and they should decide them on a case-by-case basis.

“Standardization” and “standards-based reform,” although they contain the word “standard,” have come to mean something entirely different in the context of current school reform. The terms share common roots, but as former assistant secretary of education Diane Ravitch describes it, “What once was the standards movement was replaced by the accountability movement. What once was an effort to improve the quality of education turned into an

accounting strategy: Measure, then punish or reward” (16). “Standardization” and “standards-based reform” use the familiar and agreeable language of the educational “standard,” but have in fact come to signify a reform movement based on a one-size-fits-all philosophy and top-down control.

***Dr. David Parenti:** We get the grant, we study the problem, we propose solutions. If they listen, they listen. If they don't, it still makes for great research. What we publish on this is gonna get a lot of attention.*

***Howard “Bunny” Colvin:** From who?*

***Parenti:** From other researchers, academics.*

***Colvin:** Academics?! What, they gonn' study your study? [Chuckles and shakes head.] When do this shit change? — The Wire, episode 4.13*

So where does *The Wire* come in? A television series—even if it is deemed by many critics as the greatest show of all time—is not usually the best way to analyze complex sociological issues of societal inequality. However, *The Wire* is a special case. Much more than an average crime drama, the series is truly an examination of the “various institutions [that] work together to limit opportunities for the urban poor. . . . More than simply telling a gripping story, ‘The Wire’ shows how the deep inequality in inner-city America results from the web of lost jobs, bad schools, drugs, imprisonment, and how the situation feeds on itself” (Chaddha and Wilson).

In its first season, *The Wire* examines the War on Drugs, and the ineffectiveness of petty street arrests. The second season focuses on the loss of working-class jobs, the third on the

corrupt world of city politics, the fourth on the crumbling urban education system, and the fifth on the ineffectiveness of the mainstream media to cover important issues. But while each season chooses a particular institution as its focal point, the series never loses sight of the fact that all of the various institutions work together to restrict the opportunities available to the urban population. In fact, this is why *The Wire* becomes a particularly effective text in examining the deeply-ingrained societal inequality that continues to exist. Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson, who are currently teaching a course at Harvard entitled “HBO’s *The Wire* and its Contribution to Understanding Urban Inequality,” write: “Those kinds of connections are very difficult to illustrate in academic works. Though scholars know that deindustrialization, crime and prison, and the education system are deeply intertwined, they must often give focused attention to just one subject in relative isolation, at the expense of others.” As a wide-ranging television series, though, *The Wire* has the freedom and ability to address all of these issues and the ways in which they intersect. Essentially, *The Wire* makes visible that which is hard to see in academic research, policy reports, and other narrowly focused studies.

In my thesis, I will, by necessity, limit my focus to look at the ways in which schooling functions and is portrayed in the series. Closely examining just one institution, though, will not limit the influence or importance of the show. Talking with teachers and students, for example, would likely result in much similar data about specific schools, but the average teacher or student is unlikely to acknowledge or discuss the complex role of schools in the institutional web that works to sustain societal inequality. By using *The Wire* as my primary text, I can more easily illustrate the interconnectedness of institutions in reproducing social inequality, even while only looking closely at schools.

As Chaddha and Wilson state, “‘The Wire’ is fiction, but it forces us to confront social realities more effectively than any other media production in the era of so-called reality TV. It does not tie things up neatly; as in real life, the problems remain unsolved, and the cycle repeats itself as disadvantages become more deeply entrenched.” It should be clear to anyone who has watched the series—and, by now, to even those who haven’t—that *The Wire* is more than just a TV show; it is a complex, multi-faceted examination of urban life and inequality.

Thus far, I have contended that schools are sites of the reproduction of social inequality; that the current standards-based reform movement in education is flawed; and that *The Wire* is not only a legitimate text for academic analysis, but perhaps even better than traditional scholarly resources. But how will these three facets come together in a single thesis?

Going forth, I will argue that *The Wire* captures the issues currently facing our nation’s schools in the era of NCLB and top-down standardization. These policies assume that the way to improve schools is by instituting broad standards and using standardized tests as measures for accountability purposes. If educational standards are in place, the thinking goes, then any failure to improve is the fault of individual teachers and students.

The Wire, particularly in its fourth season, both reaffirms and contradicts this narrative. Through the actions of characters such as Mayor Tommy Carcetti and middle school assistant principal Marcia Donnelly, the audience can see the push for higher test scores and the top-down pressure that arises in the effort to reach “higher standards.” It is clear that this is, in fact, the type of reform movement taking place in U.S. schools. But through characters like math teacher Roland “Prez” Pryzbylewski, police officer-turned-research assistant Howard “Bunny” Colvin, and students Randy, Duquan (“Dukie”), Michael, and Namond, *The Wire* illustrates that this type of reform is not making any real difference in the educational opportunities available to urban

youth; if anything, it limits them further and restricts teachers from setting and teaching toward actual learning standards.

It never explicitly states it, but through the carefully crafted storylines and character arcs, *The Wire* effectively argues that the current one-size-fits-all policy of standardization does not work. In fact, I will argue that the show makes the case that not only are “higher standards” not improving students’ educational experiences, but they are also helping to ensure that students end up in their socially-predetermined positions. *The Wire* illustrates that schools do indeed function as sites of reproduction of social inequality, and that the current standards-based reform movement only contributes to that, rather than really reforming and improving the U.S. public school system.

In the rest of this introductory section, I review the literature relating to standards-based reform, looking at three prominent proponents (Kevin R. Kosar, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, and Richard Phelps) and three opponents (Deborah Meier, William Ayers, and Alfie Kohn) of the movement. My argument lines up with those of the opponents, but goes a step further to analyze the role standardization plays in the reproduction of social inequality in schools, and its deeper impact on the way schools function, beyond testing. From there, I provide a background context to the diverse histories informing *The Wire* and my thesis: the rise of school standardization, *The Wire*’s place in the television landscape, and the growth and decline of American urban centers. Finally, as a framework for my analysis, I offer an explanation of social reproduction theory and the ideas of such theorists as Pierre Bourdieu about how schools function as sites for the reproduction of social inequality.

For the rest of my thesis, I directly engage *The Wire*, analyzing specific aspects and situations and how they illustrate that standards-based reform is a failed policy. In the first body

chapter, I study standardization on a policy level. What is the standard-based reform policy that is actually being pursued in *The Wire*'s middle school? What sort of tracking results from the top-down policy?

In the second main chapter, I address how standardization informs power dynamics in the school. I look specifically at how top-down standardization, largely in the form of standardized testing, affects relationships between students, faculty, and administrators, and how school has largely come to mirror prison for lower-class students of Color due to the burden placed on school authority figures to monitor student behavior. I also examine the ability of those who are setting the policy at the top of the chain of command to ultimately be free from accountability.

Finally, in the third body chapter, I examine how school standardization affects students' engagement in learning. How do students react differently to the state-mandated and -tested curricula versus an independent curriculum designed by their teacher? I also look at how standardization in many cases causes students to become so disengaged it pushes them out of schools and into other learning environments.

In the end, I hope to have provided a strong case that the current top-down push for school standardization and standards-based accountability is not working, and is, in fact, perpetuating the role of schools as sites for the reproduction of social inequality. By using *The Wire*, I am not only combining my passions for education and television, but am also proving my point by using a rich text that has the unique ability to consider the multiple forces that affect the urban poor. *The Wire* is a piece of pop culture, but its popularity does not change the fact that it addresses issues of urban life and inequality in a way few other texts can. However, I do not plan to prescribe lengthy solutions. Instead, I plan to paint a portrait of an educational system that is deeply flawed, likely beyond repair. We can try to reform it, but we will always be playing, in

the words of David Simon, a “rigged game.” Though some may call that cynical, I prefer Simon’s interpretation that it is merely “pragmatically realistic.”

LITERATURE REVIEW

“... you gotta show some flex, give and take on both sides.” — Stringer Bell

The White House website states, “Providing a high-quality education for all children is critical to America’s economic future. Our nation’s economic competitiveness and the path to the American Dream depend on providing every child with an education that will enable them to succeed in a global economy that is predicated on knowledge and innovation” (“Education”). Taken at face value, this statement is an admirable one, and provides justification for a strong national education system. However, the methods currently being used to attempt to provide this “high-quality education for all” fall under the umbrella of standards-based reform, a movement that is controversial and has both its supporters and detractors.

There are two main viewpoints that come forth in the literature relating to standards-based reform and the rise of standardization. Scholars and educators such as Deborah Meier, Alfie Kohn, and William Ayers believe that the current push for standardization and top-down control of school instruction threatens the basic democratic philosophy of education and strips teachers and administrators of their power. On the other side, the federal government and education scholars and researchers, such as Kevin R. Kosar, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, and Richard Phelps, argue that standards and high-stakes tests are necessary to provide educational equity, since they hold schools accountable for student achievement, and that local control is not necessarily the best way to achieve better schools. Within both camps, there are varying degrees of agreement over just how effective or ineffective standards are.

Social reproduction theory states that schools are the primary site for the production and reproduction of “the social relations of capitalist society” (MacLeod 11), and that schools are

largely responsible for the preservation of social hierarchical organization. Largely missing from the literature regarding standards-based reform, though, is the role it plays in the reproduction of social inequities. Some critics of the standardization movement suggest that schools play a role in deepening the current educational crisis that disproportionately affects youth of Color, but the critique is usually focused more on why tests don't measure what they claim to measure, or on the fact that it is impossible to agree on what is important knowledge, than on the role of standards in reproducing inequality. Some proponents of the movement address inequities like the achievement gap, and then purport that laws like NCLB will help solve the problem. In this literature review, then, I will describe the main views on the current standards-based reform movement, while acknowledging the lack of focus on the ways in which standardization contributes to the fact that schools function as sites of social reproduction.

Deborah Meier, founder of the Central Park East schools in New York City and the Mission Hill pilot school in Boston, is one of the leaders of the movement against standardization. According to Meier, the “real crisis” in education is not that bad schools are contributing to American economic decline, the view popularized in the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk* (“Will Standards Save” 9). Rather, the crisis lies in “the absence of any sense of responsibility for one’s community and of decency in personal relationships” (13), which results in the alienation of youth from the larger culture, and of the general public from its schools. This alienation and disconnect means that “the power to protect or support [public schools] now lies increasingly in the hands of public or private bodies that have no immediate stake in the daily life of the students” (14). Since the crisis has been wrongly diagnosed, the policy assumptions—the rise of standards-based reform—are also false. The standards being decided upon by “CEOs, federal and state legislators, university experts, [and] presidential think tanks” (14-5) are, in her

view, too simple and don't rely on the opinions and knowledge of multiple sources, and, most importantly, of the people who "know the particulars of each child and each situation" (17).

Meier acknowledges that a difference exists between standards and standardization: "The alternative to standardization is real standards. ... [which] combine careful expertise, public evidence, and eventual reliance on human judgment, not hidden behind tests but right out front" ("In Schools" 133-4). But the current standards upon which the U.S. education system is now relying are not designed to actually improve education; "[t]hey are designed for sorting students" (107), and much of that sorting happens along racial lines. Here, Meier gets close to the idea of standardization and high-stakes tests as tools for social reproduction, but she quickly moves on to a discussion of bias in testing. Nevertheless, even without explicitly addressing the link between standardization and the perpetuation of social inequality, Meier comes down against standardization, arguing that "the demands of democratic life ... are best met by preserving plural definitions of a good education, local decision making, and a respect for ordinary human judgments" ("Will Standards Save" 29).

Progressive education scholar Alfie Kohn critiques standardization as a form of top-down control of schools. He, like Meier, also discusses the meaninglessness of standardized test scores and the fact that standardized tests rarely test what they purport to test, but his argument against standardization is more focused on the fact that top-down standardization fits the "demand model" of educational change. In this model, "those outside—and, figuratively speaking, above—the classroom decide what the people in it are required to do. Lists of specific achievement goals are imposed on teachers and students" (93). This approach, Kohn argues, "describes the Tougher Standards movement to a T" (93). Like Meier, he also questions the fact that "many of the people doing the imposing, even on the state or local level [e.g., legislators,

curriculum publishers], know precious little about teaching and learning” (94). When the group of people dictating curriculum, assessments, and sanctions do not know the children they are teaching, let alone the subject material or pedagogy to teach them, how can it be good for the students?

As Kohn puts it, “[t]elling teachers exactly what to do and then holding them ‘accountable’ for the results does not reflect a commitment to excellence” (95). Instead, teachers tend to translate the high pressure onto their students, causing them to perform even less well. The instructors, in turn, often become demoralized, even to the point of leaving the profession. Accountability as a concept is a good one, but under the current system of standardization, “it has approximately the same effect on learning that a noose has on breathing” (95).

Kohn also looks at the different effects the top-down “demand model” has on White students and students of Color, and concludes that the latter group is “more likely than their peers to spend time taking multiple-choice standardized tests and to be taught a low-level curriculum designed around those tests—all in the name of ‘raising standards,’ of course” (9). Because schools serving predominantly students of Color are more often viewed as “failing” and “underachieving,” they are also more likely to be the specific targets of standardization in order to “increase achievement.” But when the form this standardization takes is “fill[ing] in worksheets on command, the further they [students of Color] fall behind affluent kids who are less tightly controlled and more likely to get lessons that help them understand ideas” (10). Kohn argues that top-down standardization will, by design, sustain and enlarge the racial achievement gap. Thus, although he doesn’t frame it as such, he essentially makes the case that standards-based reform, or, as he calls it, Tougher Standards, is reproducing social inequality. It is not the bulk of his argument against standardization, though, and by not using the theoretical language

of Bourdieu, it loses some of its scholarly impact. Still, Kohn makes a strong case against the current movement for tougher standards.

Though he also lacks the theoretical frame, education reform activist William Ayers comes the closest to addressing the role of standardization in reproducing equality. The “conservative push,” he argues, “dressed up as a concern for standards, is at its heart a fraud. . . . [I]t subtly shifts responsibility away from the powerful, making scapegoats of the victims of power” (65). Like Meier and Kohn (who is against the notion that we need to “raise standards,” meaning students need to “know more, do more, perform better” (14), but not that we shouldn’t have guidelines for classroom instruction), Ayers believes “high academic standards . . . are essential to good schools” (65). But when all schools, both successful and woefully inadequate, are forced to follow the same guidelines, it ends up creating “two parallel systems—one privileged, adequate, successful, and largely white; the other disadvantaged in countless ways, disabled, starving, failing, and African-American” (66). Although that example was specifically describing the school system in Illinois, it reflects the reality of the whole nation’s educational institutions under a system of standardization.

According to Ayers, the current system of standards contradicts the stated purpose of education in a democracy: “to break down barriers, to overcome obstacles, to open doors, minds, and possibilities” (67). The reality is that the school crisis has become “a crisis of the poor, of the cities, of Latino and African-American communities,” where “the structures of privilege and oppression apparent in the larger society are mirrored in our schools” (66). It is not in line with the democratic ideals of education, and, in fact, actively works against them. We need academic standards and expectations, he argues, but not in the form of “simple, punitive, one-size-fits-all” standardization (69).

Unlike the critics of the current standards-based reform movement, its proponents argue that standardization is necessary for measuring what students learn and holding schools and students accountable. The federal government, with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, is arguably the biggest and most powerful proponent of standards-based reform. Kevin R. Kosar, who researches and writes about education policy, first makes the case that low student achievement is, in fact, an appropriate policy issue for the government to address. Our country's "economic health is becoming increasingly linked to the education levels of its citizens" (41), and "the health of the US system of representative democracy is contingent, in part, on the education level of the citizenry" (42). To remain a functioning and competitive democracy, then, the government has a stake in ensuring high levels of education for all.

If the federal government is intent on raising education levels, the question then becomes, why choose and support this form of top-down standards-based reform? *A Nation at Risk* laid the early groundwork for national education standards by focusing on "how much students were learning, [using] test scores as proxies, and [determining] that students were not learning as much as they should (which implies a standard of some sort)" (Kosar 89). Over time, the standards-based reform movement evolved due to political considerations: the right got to raise academic standards "for the sake of accountability," while, for the left, there was more spending, "much of which is directed toward bolstering resources" (192). Thus, in the eyes of the federal government, standards-based reform is not only an effective way to measure educational achievement and maintain accountability, but is also an ideological win for both political parties.

It is not surprising, then, that the government would ignore the role standardization plays in reproducing social inequality. In fact, according to Kosar, the government supports standards-based reform precisely for the fact that it *does not* "limit itself to small programs of underserved

children” (195). Rather, the view is that “the federal government should make policy to see that all children receive a rigorous education” (195). By adopting this one-size-fits-all philosophy, though, the government ultimately overlooks the disproportionate impact its standards-based reform policy has on students of Color.

Education economist Richard P. Phelps defends the standardization movement by specifically addressing the merits of standardized tests. He argues that the most basic benefit of tests is in “diagnosis:” Standardized tests can determine the strengths and weaknesses of students, teachers, administrators, and schools (225). That information can then be used to hold decision makers accountable. He also defends high-stakes tests based on the mere fact that they are so widely used and accepted: “How else would we know how our children are achieving? How else would we know how our schools and teachers are performing?” (222). Phelps seems to support testing simply because “the need for tests is obvious” (222), finding evidence to support that claim after the fact, rather than reaching the conclusion that tests are necessary because of that evidence. This backwards approach is especially problematic when compared to critics’ assertions that the need for standardization is anything but obvious; in fact, to opponents, the need is non-existent.

While he dismisses much of the criticism surrounding “teaching to the test,” widespread cheating, and being biased against female students and students of Color, Phelps does admit that “no standards-based test, no matter how much care and effort is put into writing it, can salvage bad curricular standards” (270). He vigorously supports the use of high-stakes standardized tests, but at least agrees with critics that the subject matter in the curriculum is of utmost importance.

As he defends testing, Phelps also criticizes the critics of standardization. Because high-stakes standardized testing is “capable of exposing flaws in the current system, thereby opening

the system to criticism and inducing calls for change” (21), Phelps argues that educators oppose testing because it threatens their profession. Educators, and specifically education professors, he claims, criticize standardized testing for reasons of self-interest and self-preservation—they are afraid low test scores will reflect poorly on them and their field. Thus, the anti-testing rhetoric that is presented to the public through the media as “‘technical’ research from ‘independent’ sources is neither technical nor independent” (22), since it is coming mainly from education researchers who have an inherent interest in opposing the standards-based reform movement. Ultimately, Phelps defends standardization, specifically in the form of high-stakes standardized testing, because those in favor of them are education consumers: “[t]hose who really want to know if and how students are learning [and] want usable, objective, reliable, accurate measures.” Contrarily, those opposed to testing are “[t]hose who do not really want to know [and] want vague, fungible, subjective measures that they can control ... or no measures at all” (25). Phelps’ claim that educators—even putting “educators” in disparaging quotes—are most likely to oppose testing because they are the most invested in education directly contradicts the critiques of Meier, Kohn, and Ayers that testing doesn’t work precisely *because* it is decided by politicians and policymakers, and not by educators.

While contrary views do not necessarily discount one side over the other, in this case, Phelps’ argument is severely compromised by the fact that he is admittedly “not motivated primarily by a fondness for standardized testing ... [but] against censorship, dishonesty, and arrogance, traits that can be found in profusion among some opponents of standardized testing” (1). His lack of critical analysis can more easily be explained, then, by a personal dislike of the opponents of standardization, rather than a strong belief in the merits of testing itself. And by

focusing almost exclusively on the issue of high-stakes standardized testing, Phelps takes too narrow an approach and misses the negative effects standardization has on social inequality.

Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom are highly supportive of standardization and testing, as well, but take a different approach than Phelps and frame their argument around the racial achievement gap and the role tests need to play in closing it. The Thernstroms see opposition to standardized tests as a defense mechanism, since it is easier to attack the tests (“blaming the messenger”) than to “deal with the problem that the test scores have identified” (25). For instance, many critics accuse standardized tests of containing built-in racial bias, but the Thernstroms bluntly state: “The MCAS [Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Exam] tests and similar assessments are not biased against any group. It is a regrettable but inescapable fact that the results indicate that some groups are not learning as much as they should and could” (39). In their view, claims of racial bias are just convenient ways to avoid dealing with the real meaning: that certain racial groups are not achieving as highly as they should be. The Thernstroms make it clear that they do not believe innate intelligence levels are the reasoning behind different achievement levels, but do adopt an unwavering stance that “test scores matter” (39), and are the only way to identify gaps in achievement so that we may attempt to remedy them.

Writing alone in her article “No Excuses,” Abigail Thernstrom directly replies to Meier’s critique of standardization by essentially arguing against standardization as the only form of standards; they are talking past, instead of to, one another. Thernstrom asks of Meier, “Would she label the insistence that kids read abhorrent ‘standardization’?” (37). Meier, as noted above, would argue that reading is a standard to which all students should be held; it is the high-stakes, one-size-fits-all approach to assessment that she opposes. Yet, Thernstrom supports the one-size-

fits-all standardization movement for a simple reason: no excuses. “Kids can come from low-income, one-parent families, or from chaotic neighborhoods. The color of their skin may be a few shades darker than that of an Irish Catholic. But in the classroom, it doesn’t matter” (36). Ironically, Thernstrom’s argument in favor of standardization and testing as a tool to close the achievement gap and achieve racial equity ignores the role testing plays in not only *not* closing the achievement gap, but widening it as well. This kind of color-blind ideology typifies what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, a professor of sociology at Duke University, calls New Racism: “practices that are subtle, institutional, and apparently nonracial” (3). Despite seemingly good intentions, the denial of seeing color, in fact, works to reinscribe racial inequality.

Through an examination of some of the existing literature surrounding school standardization and standards-based reform, it is clear that there are two sides—for and against—although individual arguments on a given side vary in approach. However, while I will argue in my thesis that opponents like Meier, Ayers, and Kohn are correct in their distrust and rejection of the current standards-based reform movement, I will also attempt to fill in the gap that exists across the body of literature pertaining to the role of standardization in sustaining and perpetuating social inequality. This will not be a space for debate between the two camps; instead, I will be using *The Wire* to make the case against standardization, while adding a theory-based layer to the existing oppositional literature by analyzing how the movement aids and abets the social reproduction of inequality.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

“Yeah, now, well, the thing about the old days: they the old days.” — Slim Charles

In this section, I will review three distinct histories that inform my thesis topic. First, and most importantly considering my theme, I present the history of the standards-based reform movement, from its roots in the Cold War to its current state. Next, I document the history of *The Wire* itself, and how particular innovations in the television industry enabled the series to be created and thrive creatively, as it is important to understand the mechanisms in place that allowed the series to function as a social critique as well as a piece of entertainment. Finally, I give a brief history of urban development, which is especially important considering the setting of *The Wire* and the fact that the low performing schools I focus on are predominantly located in urban centers and populated by people of Color.

The Rise of School Standardization:

As I explained previously, there is a distinction between “standards”—“guidelines for what goes on in classrooms” (Kohn 14)—and “standardization”—a top-down system of reform to hold schools and students accountable for better performance. It is the latter that has taken over the current school reform movement, contributed to the rise of high-stakes standardized testing, and is continuing to relegate low-achieving students to dysfunctional and inadequate schools by imposing harsh sanctions on those schools, teachers, and students who most need assistance and resources. It is important, then, to understand how this movement began and developed, in order to know how it got to where it is today.

Former assistant secretary of education Diane Ravitch explains that the answer to “Where did education reform go wrong?” can be traced back to the Reagan administration’s 1983 release of the report *A Nation at Risk* (22). The Cold War, and especially the Soviet launch in 1957 of Sputnik (Kohn 18), prompted concern over the American education system, but a 1975 *New York Times* story that reported a steady decline in SAT scores was the direct precursor to the establishment of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, a group appointed by Reagan’s secretary of education, Terrel Bell (Ravitch 24). The report was filled with “near-apocalyptic language” (Kohn 18) describing the failing state of U.S. education, but that flashy language let the report “[get] what it wanted: the public’s attention” (Ravitch 25).

Critics of *A Nation at Risk* rejected its basic claim that the American education system was failing (Garrison; Kohn), and, “[i]n fact, hysteria about the achievements of our schools was, and continues to be, largely a myth” (Nichols & Berliner 4). Yet, Ravitch counters that, “Far from being a revolutionary document, the report was an impassioned plea to make our schools function better in their core mission as academic institutions and to make our education system live up to our nation’s ideals” (25). While the report did cite unreliable test scores as evidence for declining school achievement, its main argument “said nothing about closing schools, privatization, state takeover of districts, or other heavy-handed forms of accountability” (Ravitch 25). Instead, it suggested fundamental change to the way students were being taught and to the nation’s conception of education. Essentially, it argued that we needed higher standards, but in the sense of *real* standards.

The alarm set off by *A Nation at Risk* positioned national education as an important political issue, one taken up by each president since Ronald Reagan. During the early 1990s, Ravitch herself, as George H.W. Bush’s assistant secretary of education, developed a system to

award grants “to consortia of professional groups of teachers and scholars to develop voluntary national standards in history, English language arts, science, civics, economics, the arts, foreign languages, geography, and physical education” (Ravitch 16). The national standards movement fell apart almost before it started, though. Lynne Cheney attacked the history standards for their “political bias” (Ravitch 17), which turned them into a controversial political issue, and when Bill Clinton took office, his administration “wanted nothing to do with them ... [and] disowned them, pointing out that it had not commissioned them” (Ravitch 18).

Instead, the Clinton administration wrote its own legislation, the Goals 2000 program, which aimed to “foster innovation in schooling by encouraging private and local initiatives” (Kosar 95), by having states write their own standards and tests, rather than having them passed down from the federal government. The problem was, though, that “most of the state standards were vague when it came to any curriculum content. ... Most state standards were windy rhetoric, devoid of concrete descriptions of what students should be expected to know and be able to do” (Ravitch 19). So, the dissolution of a national curriculum standards movement, due to its toxic nature as a political issue, led to the creation of a watered-down state standards system, in which the “standards” addressed hardly any meaningful ideas around curriculum.

This vague legislation, adhering to the idea that “raising standards to raise achievement ... [was] a rational policy” (Kosar 143), accomplished little in terms of true education reform, but did contain an important basic tenet—“leaving it to the states to set their own standards and pick their own tests” (Ravitch 20-1)—that the next president, George W. Bush, also believed in and built into his landmark No Child Left Behind (NCLB) program. Under NCLB, which passed with bipartisan support, schools were required to “demonstrate adequate [yearly] progress toward the goal of making every student proficient in math and English by 2014,” or else “be subject to

increasingly onerous sanctions” (Ravitch 21). Under this new federal mandate, schools, many of which had meaningless standards already, were required to test students on their proficiency in those standards. Thus, “[t]est-based accountability—not standards—became our national education policy” (Ravitch 21). The requirement was now to meet a certain measurable goal, not to actually make sure students were learning meaningful curricular material.

The passage of NCLB was a testament to just how important the ideas of standards-based reform, accountability, and data-driven decision making have become among policymakers and politicians in Washington. A “reformer” was no longer defined by a political party affiliation; he was now “someone who supports competition between schools, charter schools, test-based accountability, performance pay for teachers, and No Child Left Behind, while being ready to battle the teachers’ unions” (Ravitch 21). The fact that Democrats have equally adopted these once-Republican ideals can currently be seen in President Obama’s selection of Arne Duncan as Secretary of Education. One of Obama’s original choices, Linda Darling-Hammond, was seen as too radical due to her negative views of Teach for America and her friendly relations with teachers’ unions (Ravitch). Instead, Obama needed to pick a “real” reformer, who “supported testing, accountability, and choice ... [who] closed low-performing schools and fired administrators and teachers” (Ravitch 22). As it has evolved over the last several presidential administrations, the school reform movement has lost partisan affiliation and become a system upon which both sides of the political spectrum largely agree. The problem, though, is that it is a system that carries little educational value and instead places importance on measures of assessment, rather than on the actual knowledge those assessments purportedly measure.

Although he was not discussing school reform, Albert Einstein’s axiom that “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts” certainly

applies to the present situation. As the events described above demonstrate, however, current school reform has ultimately shifted from a “standards movement” to a “testing movement” in which what counts and what is being counted do not line up (Ravitch). *A Nation at Risk*, while it may have overstated the dire state of the education system, advocated for a legitimate improvement in what we expect schools to teach students. The message taken away from it, though, and tweaked over the years through the political process, was that we really just needed a system of higher “standards” that could be tested and then used for accountability purposes. Unfortunately, the result has been a watered-down education that has only gotten worse for the students who need it most.

***The Wire* and the Television Landscape:**

David Simon, creator of *The Wire*, has often compared his landmark series to a novel (Potter and Marshall 190). HBO, the network on which the series aired from 2002 to 2008, is famous for its slogan, “It’s not TV. It’s HBO.” It isn’t just a coincidence, then, that a TV series that supposedly transcends the televisual medium and approaches the level of literature would find its home on the premium cable network that claims to go beyond mere television.

Jason Mittell, an associate professor of American Studies and Film & Media Culture at Middlebury College, states that *The Wire* is “a product of 21st [-century] television, with particular opportunities and possibilities established by how the medium evolved in the 20th century.” Specific developments in the television industry had to occur for *The Wire* to even make it to television screens, let alone unfold in such a manner that led it to be widely hailed as the best TV series of all time. These developments occurred primarily in what Mittell calls the “industrial, technological, and aesthetic contexts of television.”

In the context of the entertainment industry, American television has “traditionally been a closed market dominated by a small number of national networks” (Mittell). For much of the 1960s and ’70s, “three behemoth networks ruled the television landscape” (“Klein”), which led NBC’s then-head of research, Paul Klein, to theorize that people “do not watch particular programs ... they simply watch television” (“Klein”). Under this Least Objectionable Programming (L.O.P.) theory, “network programmers worry less about creating exceptional programs to attract viewers than about supplying the least objectionable program on the air at any given moment” (“Klein”). There was little incentive to innovate, since networks could be relatively certain viewers would watch their programs no matter what, as there was little in the way of competition.

It wasn’t until the 1980s and ’90s that cable channels really started entering the market, providing alternative options for audiences and programmers (Mittell). While these cable channels offered more variety, the content remained relatively tame and inexpensive, focusing on news, sports, and talk shows, and thus “few cable programs directly matched the standard fictional fare of networks” (Mittell).

Home Box Office (HBO) was an earlier cable channel, starting in the 1970s, but it followed a different path than most of its fellow cable networks. It is, as Mittell describes, a “*premium channel*” (emphasis his), which allows the network to charge subscribers an extra monthly fee in return for having no external advertising and having looser standards and practices in regards to sex, violence, and profanity than traditional broadcast and cable networks. The effect of HBO’s business model, then, is that “they are not driven by getting high ratings to sell slots to advertisers, but instead look for programming that is sufficiently desirable to convince viewers to spend an extra \$10-15 a month for the service” (Mittell).

HBO began as a more lowbrow entertainment destination, taking advantage of its freedom from advertiser oversight by offering series and specials heavy on sex, profanity, and violence, but light on substance. But by the mid-1990s, there was a shift in HBO's strategy: "[T]he channel started offering fictional series comparable to the genres of network television, but with an edgy approach to stand-out from more conventional network shows" (Mittell). That shift toward "quality" programming was a way for the network not only to produce better shows, but also to brand itself as "not TV." Unlike the broadcast networks, HBO was marked by exclusive access in that it was a subscription service and it aired shows that gave audiences a feeling of sophistication (Santo). This programming and marketing trend pushed HBO above the fray, distinguishing itself from the popular tastes of the masses with "edgier," if not radically different, fare (Santo 26).

Mittell cites three programs in particular that helped pave the way for *The Wire: Oz*, the network's first original dramatic series, set in a maximum-security prison; *Sex and the City*, its first major hit that, despite its dissimilarity with *The Wire*, proved HBO's ability to break television conventions and garner "buzz" (good word-of-mouth); and *The Sopranos*, the multiple-Emy-winning mob series that established HBO's standing as "a highbrow channel with sophisticated original programming." Its ability to push boundaries attracted both audiences, who could only find this type of risky, unique show on HBO, and talented writer/creators, who had more leeway to experiment and bring their visions to life without compromise.

But while HBO had more freedom to experiment with its programming, it "maintained a particular relationship with network television that is rooted in equal parts innovation and repetition" (Santo 24). Because of its subscription model, HBO does not need to pursue a L.O.P.

programming model, but it nonetheless “draws upon existing television forms, narratives, aesthetics, themes, and economic and institutional practices” (Santo 24). Its programs stay close to recognizable TV, while offering enough of a twist to be marketed as “different.” On the surface, *The Sopranos* was just a mob story, *Deadwood* a Western, and *The Wire* a police drama, but, due to the freedom provided by HBO, they were able to become much more complex than their high-concepts may imply.

The Wire arose from the success of *The Sopranos* in the early 2000s, and while it certainly “could have only emerged out of the world of premium cable, with its willingness for controversy, profanity, and a small but devoted audience” (Mittell), as well as its freedom from advertiser constraints (Santo), it also owed its success to the development of new television technologies that emerged in the past decade. The rise of digital video recorders (DVRs), digital cable, On Demand, and TV-on-DVD all helped counter television’s traditional schedule-driven approach, and allowed viewers more freedom to watch the series at their convenience (Mittell). Of *The Wire*, Simon himself stated that traditional ratings came not to matter: “The fifth [and final] season had the worst ratings and more people were watching it. People weren’t waiting for it on a Sunday night, you could get it on demand or were waiting for the DVDs or getting it illegally on the web. HBO knew this and came to the conclusion that ratings no longer mattered” (Plunkett). Despite low viewership during its timeslot, the audience, watching in other, non-traditional ways, was large enough for HBO to justify a five-season run of the series.

The show’s audience was relatively small, and the series didn’t receive the mainstream press attention or Emmy attention that shows like *The Sopranos* did. During the show’s notably Emmy-less run, Emmy voters suggested the lack of industry approval stemmed from the fact that it was “practically impenetrable to new viewers,” full of “grim surroundings and coarse

language,” and, being shot in Baltimore, was “[o]ut of sight, out of mind” (Levine). Additionally, the series featured a “large, sprawling, and unprecedented black cast” (Vest 191), which contributed to its revolutionary nature, but perhaps also to its critical snobbery. Despite these facts, though, the evolution of digital technologies “helped create a dedicated fanbase around *The Wire*” (Mittell). Fans and television critics used blogs to “promote the show and convene fan discussions” and advocate for the series online (Mittell). Viewers were able to use technology not only to watch the show in new ways, but also to find fellow fans online and to discuss it with them.

These new technologies and shifts in the industry since the end of the 20th century “have enabled the creative possibilities of television to expand in interesting new ways that would have been unthinkable in earlier eras” (Mittell), and *The Wire* took particular advantage of those possibilities to create a unique mix between what Mittell calls “narrative complexity,” where a show focuses its efforts on telling longer stories over a variety of genres, and more conventional television aesthetics. *The Wire* is certainly a complex serialized drama, unlike any other series that came before or after. As Mittell puts it, “No episode stands alone, and it is virtually inconceivable to watch the series out-of-order with any coherence.” Yet, *The Wire* also has roots in traditional television narrative; it doesn’t use dream sequences, voice-overs, or other narrative techniques popularized by contemporary serial shows. But even with its more straightforward storytelling aesthetics, “*The Wire*’s internal storyworld is arguabl[y] the most complex ever to appear on American television” (Mittell), and the combination of narrative complexity and more conventional techniques, like a familiar genre and “objective narration” (Mittell), which lent the show its pseudo-documentary feel, enabled the series to establish itself as revolutionary, even though it looked at first like just another police/crime drama.

That feeling of realism and authenticity is “[o]ne of the most frequently noted features of *The Wire*” (Klein 177), and lends the series much of its legitimacy as a “socially-conscious text.” The creative freedom provided by HBO made it the perfect place for David Simon to pitch his revolutionary take on the crime genre, despite the fact that Simon had little formal training in television writing. Simon was a longtime journalist for the *Baltimore Sun*, who, according to his editor Rebecca Corbett, used “the cop beat as a whole window onto the sociology of the city, a way of examining the failings of the government, a way to think about policy, especially drug policy, and a way of telling stories” (quoted in Vest 12). His interest in the multifaceted urban environment led him to shadow a Baltimore Homicide Unit for one year, an experience that provided the material for his 1991 book, *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (Vest 12). The book was later adapted into an NBC television series for which Simon wrote, providing him with his first television experience.

Simon continued at the *Sun*, but took another year-long leave to research his book *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood*. His second work provided the basis for the HBO miniseries *The Corner*, which “won the 2000 Emmy Awards for Outstanding Miniseries and Outstanding Writing for a Miniseries or Movie” (Vest 13), and which served as the precursor to *The Wire*. To create the latter, Simon drew upon his years of reporting and research experience and partnered with Ed Burns, a former Baltimore Police Detective “whom Simon had interviewed while covering the *Sun*’s police beat. . . . Burns’s detective career inspired many of *The Wire*’s cases and incidents” (Vest 13). Thus, although it is a work of fiction, *The Wire* is grounded in empirical research that “demonstrates [a] commitment to social realism even if it cannot be entirely realistic” (Vest 16).

Ultimately, *The Wire* is a product of substantial changes in television over the past several decades, and the work of a “television auteur” (Vest) dedicated to social realism and critique. On the industry side, the growth of cable networks allowed bolder, riskier, and more unconventional series to make it to the air, and premium cable channel HBO permitted an even greater level of creative freedom by catering only to audiences, not advertisers. Digital technologies let viewers watch and discuss shows in new ways, and, especially because of digital recording, TV writers could create more serialized stories since audiences now had ways to ensure they saw every episode; as Simon has said, “TV at this level [became] a lending library, you got a book when you wanted and read it when you wanted” (Plunkett). And the move toward narrative complexity and new storytelling techniques paved the way for *The Wire* to present “the most densely-packed and populated world ever seen on American television” (Mittell). On the creative side, Simon’s years of work researching and working in Baltimore provided a basis for the authenticity so often cited in discussions of the series. Simply put, without these industrial, technological, and aesthetic innovations in television over the past thirty years, and without David Simon’s commitment to social realism, there would be no *Wire*.

Urban Growth and Decay:

According to David Simon, *The Wire*, which takes place in inner-city Baltimore, is a “postindustrial American tragedy” (Potter and Marshall 4) — a portrait of the decay of one American urban center, but a stand-in for cities across the United States. Throughout history, racist and discriminatory tools have been used to shape U.S. cities to the point where they are today: racially segregated, high-poverty areas struggling to improve, but being largely left behind.

The United States is a diverse country with a population made up of countless racial and ethnic groups, but in this section I will be focusing my discussion solely on the experiences and history of African Americans. I recognize that this view perpetuates the Black/White paradigm, alternatives to which “are needed to account for changing experiences of race and racism” (Kim), but the scope of this topic and section is too narrow to allow for a comprehensive account of all urban populations of Color. Since Baltimore, Maryland, is a predominantly Black city, and *The Wire* focuses on a largely Black cast of characters, and any history I present in this section will have to be limited regardless, I am choosing to discuss urban development and decline only through an African American lens, all the while cognizant that the expansion of U.S. cities differed based on location and that different racial groups had different experiences.

From 1916 to 1930, during what is termed the Great Migration, large numbers of African Americans migrated North and from rural to urban areas North and South (Gottlieb 138). Labor demands and lack of immigration due to World War I attracted large numbers of Black workers to northern cities, where they were able to find jobs, “both where they had customarily been employed, and, more noticeably, where few had been hired before” (Gottlieb 140), in factories and large mills. Not only were jobs opening up in the North, but employment opportunities in the urban South were increasing as well. The wartime economy generated new jobs in various industries, such as “[c]oal and iron ore mining, dockside labor, [and] railroad and trolley line construction” (Gottlieb 140). In cities across the country, Black workers were more able than ever before to find jobs, and they were moving in large numbers to take advantage of those opportunities.

However, migrants were not met with quite the range of possibilities they had hoped for. Migrating North during wartime meant arriving during a housing shortage, and “most migrants

encountered difficulty finding a home” (Grossman 111). Additionally, “most choices were also limited by racial discrimination” (110), as “[m]ortgage lenders and real estate companies prevented [Blacks] from buying or renting houses outside the deteriorating housing districts, forcing severe overcrowding” (Gottlieb 142). This led to the process of ghettoization, as the Black population in certain neighborhoods grew to such a point where there was clear residential segregation by race.

As populations in the ghettos grew and the poorer neighborhoods began to slowly expand, “established residents tended to seek better housing in less crowded districts” (Grossman 111)—a phenomenon known as “white flight”—which led to the predatory tactic of “blockbusting.” Real estate speculators purchased homes from those Whites who feared a “Negro invasion,” and it afforded for the speculator “generous profits, as the investor could sell the properties to black home owners at inflated prices” (Grossman 112). Combined with the fact that Black workers earned less than their White counterparts (112), Blacks were spending a disproportionate amount of their income on housing.

Other racist real estate practices were used to keep Blacks segregated, which contributed to long-term urban deterioration. Landlords, eager to bring in as much rent money as possible, split up apartments and houses into smaller units, or “rabbit warrens,” of small apartments, and due to “shoddy renovation and inadequate maintenance” (Grossman 112), they soon fell into disrepair and the property values plummeted. With control over the Black housing market, White landlords also “collected rents more assiduously than they maintained their buildings” (Grossman 112), and quickly replaced tenants who demanded proper maintenance.

These discriminatory real estate tactics continued and only furthered the segregation and deterioration of Black urban neighborhoods. While these had been largely unspoken rules during

the Great Migration, in the 1930s realtors formalized their practices. In their ethical guidelines, in effect from the 1930s through the 1960s, the National Association of Real Estate Boards proclaimed that a realtor “should never be instrumental in introducing to a neighborhood a character of property or occupancy, members of any race or nationality, or any individual whose presence will be clearly detrimental to property values in a neighborhood” (Sugrue 203). The instructions were coded, but were clearly in place to keep Blacks out of White neighborhoods, lest they “institute a form of blight” (203). The realtors’ tactics worked in conjunction with restrictive covenants and discriminatory lending practices instituted by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Home Owner’s Loan Corporation; in fact, “the FHA became the government’s leading practitioner of ethnic, religious, and economic discrimination” by the 1940s (Pietila 72).

The effects of these practices were profound during the Great Depression, when the “black population in northern cities increased by nearly twenty-five percent ... [which] intensified the poverty of established residents” (Trotter 132), and up through and after World War II, when “changes in southern agriculture and land tenure systems forced blacks to take refuge in urban areas, whether or not they could find employment there” (Gottlieb 144). Even greater numbers of southern Blacks were migrating North, only to be met by the same housing problems and even fewer available jobs. And while the whole country suffers during periods of economic decline, “African Americans suffered more than their white counterparts [and] received less from their government” (Trotter 131), and Blacks tend to benefit less than Whites during periods of economic growth. Housing, economics, and race are intertwined, and the result has been the continual segregation and financial deprivation of African Americans.

These trends continued through the post-war years, and while the Black population saw some improvements coming out of the Civil Rights Movement, broad economic changes were minimal. By the mid-1970s, urban poverty was reaching new heights. Robin D. G. Kelley, currently a professor of History and American Studies & Ethnicity at the University of Southern California, describes the Chicago community of North Lawndale: Before 1970, it housed several large factories and retail outlets, providing jobs for its working-class population, but by 1980, “most of these firms had closed up shop, leaving empty lots and burned-out buildings in their wake. . . . Once a thriving industrial hub, North Lawndale became one of the poorest black ghettos in Chicago” (“Into the Fire” 280). Though North Lawndale is just one community in one city, Kelley describes its story as one that “was repeated in almost every major city in the United States after 1970” (“Into the Fire” 280). Drastic changes in the economy—technological advances that led to widespread layoffs, the 1973 oil embargo, Nixon’s price-control policies, massive military spending (Kelley, “Into the Fire” 280-1)—disproportionately affected the working class, and even more so African Americans. Black workers were forced into unskilled, low-wage service jobs because those were some of the only employment opportunities available. The other options were generally military enlistment or prison (Kelley, “Into the Fire” 284-5).

Although as a country we seem to have a better outlook on race relations today, with some claiming the election of Barack Obama as proof we are living in a “post-racial society,” the truth is that race still matters. Racism is not only still alive and well, but the effects of past racism and discrimination have become institutionalized to the point where it is almost invisible. In fact, Kelley argues, “[t]he days when jobs were plentiful, even if they were low-wage jobs, are gone. Now America’s inner city has an army of permanently unemployed men and women who have little or no hope of living the American Dream” (“Into the Fire” 333). The blatant, overt

racism of the Jim Crow era is now taboo, but a new, more subtle form of color-blind racism has replaced it, serving “as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-Civil Rights era” (Bonilla-Silva 3).

The Wire reflects this long history of urban growth and decline. Although the series is not a History Channel special, its characters and setting are products of a specific chain of historical events, largely determined by race and class. The situations in *The Wire*'s Baltimore do not exist in isolation, and this urban history is key to contextualizing characters' choices: while they may be “choosing,” it is usually between a set of options narrowly defined by their situation, which has, in turn, been defined by the decades of racially-motivated residential and economic tactics practiced in the United States.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

“We pretend to teach them, they pretended to learn, and where’d they end up? Same damn corners.” — Bunny Colvin

As I wrote previously, the fact that children born into working-class families often end up in the working class themselves, while middle- and upper-class children tend to remain in their niches as well, is no accident. Sociologists have long studied this phenomenon, and “as they explore how the social relations of capitalist society are reproduced, they invariably are led to one site: the school” (MacLeod 11). Schools, they argue, function as sites for the reproduction of the social hierarchical structure, and, in effect, guarantee the preservation of social inequality.

Marxist scholars Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis are leaders of the deterministic model of reproduction, which takes as its starting point “the structural requirements of the capitalist economic system and attempt[s] to demonstrate how individuals are obliged to fulfill predefined roles that ensure the perpetuation of a class society” (MacLeod 11). Bowles and Gintis argue that schools are set up to mirror the American class structure and do so to ensure the continuation of a stratified labor system. Due to the nature of the U.S. capitalistic economy, there is a constant need for a large body of unskilled laborers, with skilled workers and professionals required in smaller and smaller numbers.

Bowles and Gintis contend, then, that “the relationships of authority and control between administrators and teachers, teachers and students, students and students, and students and their work replicate the division of labor which dominates the workplace” (quoted in MacLeod 12). Student-teacher relationships, for example, mirror the worker-supervisor dynamic in the labor market, and the lack of student control over their school experience parallels the powerlessness

of workers in their jobs. Additionally, though, the school “functions at an ideological level to promote the attitudes and values required by a capitalist economy” (MacLeod 13). Schools teach students from different social strata in different ways, communicating class-based values through curriculum and school rules and expectations. Ultimately, according to Bowles and Gintis, schools function both to ensure the existence of a hierarchy of workers and to instill in those workers appropriate values for their social locations.

French theorist Pierre Bourdieu, working with sociologist Jean-Claude Passeron, has produced perhaps the leading body of work on social reproduction theory. The pair concludes that “[e]ducation ... is the equivalent, in the cultural order, of the transmission of genetic capital in the biological order” (32). Bourdieu and Passeron consider schooling a form of pedagogic action, and state that “all pedagogic action ... is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power” (5). In the case of schools, they are institutions that we as a society have granted incredible power—that of educating (or, quote, unquote, “educating”) every youth in America—and they use that power to pass on the values and beliefs of the dominant, upper-class culture. And schools are perfectly suited to carry out their role as sites of social reproduction thanks to their apparent neutrality and the fact that dominant culture has become so natural, it is hard to see that it is, in fact, *dominant* culture and not just “the culture.”

In essence, education functions to send cultural and societal values from generation to generation, causing children to absorb the values of their class group and remain in the socioeconomic class of their parents. In the above analogy, genetic capital is Bourdieu’s *habitus*, which he and Passeron describe as, “the product of internalization of the principles of a cultural arbitrary capable of perpetuating itself after PA [pedagogic action] has ceased and thereby of

perpetuating in practices the principles of the internalized arbitrary” (31). Their “arbitrary” refers to the conditions of a culture that denote value, but which have no basis in logic or principle. In simpler terms, “the habitus is composed of the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of those inhabiting one’s social world” (MacLeod 15). The values that are reproduced through education become absorbed and understood as one’s own, even though they are, in fact, products of one’s social location and reflect the broader societal power structure.

The claiming of certain attitudes and beliefs as one’s own helps ensure social reproduction through a “circular relationship between structures and practices”: it is a fact, for instance, that there are few chances for lower-class individuals to gain upper-level employment, and by listening to others’ attitudes and experiences, a young lower-class individual will absorb that fact and accept that he will end up in a low-level job, “thereby reinforcing the structure of class inequality” (MacLeod 15). The kinds of attitudes and values that produce the habitus, and that the habitus, in turn, produces, are ultimately what allow unequal social institutions to reproduce themselves.

The habitus can be considered the manifestation of one’s cultural capital, a key tenet to Bourdieu and Passeron’s theory. Cultural capital is defined as “the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to the next,” and this varies drastically between upper-class and working-class children (MacLeod 13-4). Schools function as sites of social reproduction, then, by “embodying class interests and ideologies” and “reward[ing] the cultural capital of the dominant classes and systematically devalu[ing] that of the lower classes” (14). Schools value and reward the forms of cultural capital that are valued in dominant society, so upper-class students who “read books, visit museums, attend concerts, and go to the theater and cinema” tend to do better academically, while lower-class students with less

exposure and experience with these high-class forms of cultural capital more often perform poorly. Thus, “schools serve as the trading post where socially valued cultural capital is parlayed into superior academic performance. Academic performance is then tuned back into economic capital by the acquisition of superior jobs” (MacLeod 14). The entire process, although it reproduces and reinforces inequality, is understood as legitimate because schools, as sites of pedagogic action, are “recognized as a legitimate agency of imposition” (Bourdieu and Passeron 22). In general, school methods—curricula, modes of assessment (tests, grades)—are accepted, and thus their privileging of a specific cultural capital goes unnoticed.

In his in-depth ethnography of students from a low-income neighborhood, Jay MacLeod, whom I have repeatedly cited in this section, does an excellent job of simplifying and communicating social reproduction in understandable terms. He describes the four main points of Bourdieu’s theory:

First, distinctive cultural capital is transmitted by each social class. Second, the school systematically valorizes upper-class cultural capital and depreciates the cultural capital of the lower classes. Third, differential academic achievement is retranslated back into economic wealth—the job market remunerates the superior academic credentials earned mainly by the upper classes. Finally, the school legitimates this process “by making social hierarchies and the reproduction of those hierarchies appear to be based on ‘gifts,’ merits, or skills established and ratified by its sanctions, or, in a word, by converting social hierarchies into academic hierarchies. (14)

In a cyclical relationship, social class determines one's cultural capital, which predetermines one's success in school, which, in turn, determines one's job path, and thus, ultimately, one's social class. Academic achievement and one's socioeconomic class, then, are inextricably linked.

Implicit in social reproduction theory is the belief that the achievement ideology is patently false. This ideology, which states that hard work is the key to success and the American Dream, ignores the broader structural forces and implications that limit one's life choices. A variety of factors, including race, class, gender, and sexuality, all shape one's chances for success or failure, and it is generally untrue that hard work is enough to overcome the various obstacles that are tied to non-dominant traits. As I have described, a lower-class socioeconomic status can often predict academic failure and a continued lower-class life, and hard work alone will generally not be enough to break the cycle when schooling as a system ensures that the cycle continues. Meritocracy is a myth, but "cloaked in the language of meritocracy, academic performance is apprehended as the result of individual ability by both high and low achievers" (MacLeod 16). Success or failure is actually "institutionally determined" (16), but through the accepted mechanisms of schooling, it is viewed to be the result of individual actions.

Social reproduction theory, as set forth by Bowles and Gintis, and Bourdieu and Passeron, concentrates on socioeconomic class rather than race. However, the two are closely linked, and, as I described above in my section about urban growth and decline, lower-class socioeconomic status has basically been guaranteed to large numbers of Blacks through the low-level jobs and poor housing made available to them over history. As urban centers have grown to house majority populations of Color, the schools in those cities have necessarily come to serve predominantly, if not entirely, students of Color, large portions of whom come from low-income families. This historical link between race and class, especially in the inner city, causes race to be

an important predictor of school achievement. Different racial groups also carry their own forms of cultural capital, but since the cultural capital of groups of Color often does not line up with that of the dominant White group, groups of Color are left at a systematic disadvantage in schools and in broader society. *The Wire* depicts these facts: the students in the show—all Black—have few options presented to them, and are essentially expected to end up in the same situations in which they begin. Despite some differences in the four main boys' economic standings, they all come from a low social class and attend a school that is part of the broader educational system set up to reproduce social inequality, and thus are left without much of a chance.

Bourdieu and Passeron do not specifically theorize the role of school standardization in social reproduction, since the recent standards-based reform movement came after their time, but standardization can still be interpreted within their framework. The push for top-down standardization has been legitimated through law and popular discourse, becoming a “dominant cultural arbitrary” (Bourdieu and Passeron 22) and is now a form of pedagogic action and, thus, symbolic violence. As such, it allows students to believe that their success or failure on a standardized test, for example, is purely a result of individual action and not a reflection on the broader educational system and the society that created it. Standardization acts merely to further inflate the false ideas of meritocracy and the achievement ideology and to communicate ideas of superiority and inferiority that are actually based on social class.

Ultimately, “schooling entrenches social inequality by reproducing class privilege and simultaneously sanctifying the resultant inequality” (MacLeod 16). Social mobility is available, albeit on an extremely limited basis, so that the society can “hold up the so-called self-made individual as ‘proof’ that barriers to success are purely personal and that the poor are poor of

their own accord” (MacLeod 242). However, these exceptions to the rule do nothing to actually change “the rule” of the system. Social inequality is a fact of life, and as much as they try to deny it, schools are the leading sites for the reproduction of that inequality.

SCHOOL POLICY

“This game is rigged, man. We like them little people on the chessboard.” — Bodie

In this chapter, I will analyze the school procedures that arise from standardized policies—specifically high-stakes testing and tracking—that are set by a central authority, not by the educators who are closest to the students and who know them best. Before looking at how school policy affects students, teachers, and administrators, as I will do in later chapters, I want to first examine the policy itself. I will use *The Wire* as a lens to consider these issues, as the storylines in the show speak to the broader educational phenomena, and to draw conclusions about the practice of top-down standardization and how it contributes to and perpetuates race- and class-based social inequality. In particular, I will look at how standardized practices are tools for the legitimization of dominant cultural capital, and how they help schools structure inequality while appearing to be neutral and fair.

High-Stakes Testing:

Throughout season four of *The Wire*, high-stakes standardized tests are a big issue. Mayor Carcetti insists that he needs to see a jump in state test scores to keep his political base happy, Principal Withers and Ms. Donnelly convey the tests’ importance to the teachers, and then the teachers are forced to “teach to the test” in their classrooms. State-wide standardized testing thus “drives the way students are taught—through drill and practice” (Beliveau and Bolf-Beliveau 92), and exemplifies the traditional “banking” concept of education as described by educational theorist Paulo Freire. As Freire explains, education becomes “an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. ... [T]he scope of action

allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filling, and storing the deposits” (58). These standardized tests, to which great penalties are attached for low scores, thus encourage—*require*, even—adherence to the banking concept of education, and ultimately result in large numbers of students not truly learning, but merely being forced to regurgitate material that will show up on a test. Students may certainly be learning something: “It may be that reading, practicing, or memorizing only what’s likely to be on the test—and covering that material in a cursory way—can sometimes help students do well on the test itself” (Kohn, *The Schools Our Children*, 32), but that type of “learning” does not translate to deep understanding or critical thinking, skills that are arguably more important in life.

Standardized testing has been around for nearly a century in the form of both aptitude and achievement tests, and these tests have been used to “inform decisions about curriculum and instruction, and make predictions about how successful a student may be in the future” (Nichols and Berliner 2). These tests have their problems regarding reliability and validity, but, “[f]or the most part, [they] have been successful” (2). The current issue, then, is not surrounding standardized testing in general, but rather high-stakes tests, “those assessments that have serious consequences attached to them” (Nichols and Berliner xv). As I discussed earlier, the No Child Left Behind legislation signed into law by President George W. Bush was the defining shift toward a national education policy of test-based accountability (Ravitch 21), and it is the results of NCLB that the students and teachers in *The Wire* have to deal with.

The flaws of NCLB—that is, the high stakes that are supposedly raising school and student achievement and holding both parties accountable are, in fact, doing neither and are inflicting more punishment for failure—are fitting with Campbell’s law, which Nichols and Berliner describe as, “the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-

making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it was intended to monitor” (26-7). In effect, it was highly probable even before NCLB was enacted that a system that tied school funding and reputation to numerical test scores would fail to meet its stated goals, and that it would have detrimental effects on all those involved. Although on the surface its goals of monitoring education and measuring school and student achievement were admirable, NCLB ended up corrupting that education by putting utmost importance on test scores rather than on actual learning. Using numbers as one of many indicators is one thing, but relying solely on those numbers is another, and, unfortunately, it is the latter that has come to define NCLB and the current standards-based reform movement in U.S. education.

High-stakes testing perfectly embodies the one-size-fits-all standards-based reform ideology. All students are expected to learn the same material and respond to it in the same way (on a test); the material that is being tested rarely has practical application; and higher test scores and “tougher standards” are being demanded from the top down, often for political reasons just as much as (if not more than) a desire to see higher achieving students. In *The Wire*, when Baltimore Mayor-Elect Tommy Carcetti is brainstorming with his staff about administration goals, he suggests they devote resources to the schools, since “education always polls well.” He is quickly diverted, since getting involved would mean the “inner-city schools with inner-city problems” become their mess. However, a massive, unforeseen budget crisis means he has to get involved, and Carcetti the reformer quickly turns into Carcetti the politician, who demands a ten point increase in all city test scores. The schools have to follow the mayor’s orders, but the motivation for those orders is not at all based in educational necessity; instead, it arises because numbers are easy to sell to voters. I will discuss how the top-down structure of a standards-based

reform system affects power relations/dynamics in a later chapter, but this is just one example of how test scores are used as political tools rather than as indicators of actual learning.

One particular phenomenon to arise from the increased reliance on high-stakes testing is “teaching to the test.” Nichols and Berliner make an important distinction between preparing students for a test, which implies instruction and assessment being rightfully aligned, and merely teaching the test, which involves “drilling, emphasizing rote memorization, teaching students how to take tests, reviewing over and over again the concepts that will be represented on the test, and giving multiple practice tests, all at the expense of other content, ideas, and curricula that may not be represented on the test” (122). But in the educational atmosphere of NCLB, that fine line has become insignificant, since, now, assessments are dictating instruction, rather than the other way around. Once test time comes around, teachers are often instructed to do nothing but test preparation. In *The Wire*, though, “preparation” is depicted as 90-minute classes of memorizing how to respond to reading comprehension prompts. The heat is turned up to keep the students drowsy so they will be able to sit through the long blocks, and they are forced to repeat, over and over, the same three or four standard responses.

In *The Wire*, Prez, the central teacher, is directly confronted with orders to teach to the test. He is a math teacher, but when the test-preparation period comes around, he is forced by the administration to teach English so his students will be ready to take the standardized test in that subject. He is informed that the April test scores will determine whether or not the state takes over the school, and thus all teachers must teach test questions directly this year. Even though some of the students are able to repeat the standard passage responses that Prez is teaching them, their sample tests, filled with spelling errors, incomplete sentences, and doodles, show that they have no grasp on the material. Even after spending hours and hours on test preparation, the

majority of students still are unable to spit back the material they were supposed to have “learned.” The time dedicated to teaching the test does nothing to help the students, and only takes away time that could be spent on real learning, which the students are clearly capable of and which we have seen in Prez’s class. (This issue of student engagement in learning will be the focus of a later chapter.)

Research has shown that “frequent testing actually reduced scores on NAEP [National Assessment of Educational Progress] and that emphasizing facts (over reasoning and communication) also reduced students’ scores” (Nichols and Berliner 132). Indeed, when the Tilghman Middle School scores come in on *The Wire*, only 38% of students are rated “proficient,” with even fewer (8%) rated “advanced.” As low as those numbers are, they prove even worse, and more meaningless, when it is revealed that “proficient” means two grades below level, while “advanced” means at or above grade level. Mrs. Sampson, a veteran teacher, tells Prez, “You score them like that, they can say we’re making progress.” All the time spent teaching to the test didn’t even raise the scores, and, ultimately, the scores themselves are unimportant, since those who score them can simply assign them an arbitrary meaning to get a more desired end result.

Going hand in hand with arbitrarily defining test score levels is the cheating that has become widespread across the country. There have been hundreds of reported cases of both teachers and students cheating before, during, and after the tests, and likely even more that have gone unnoticed (Nichols and Berliner). This fits with Campbell’s law, since teachers and students have a vested interest in producing the best scores possible, but simply because it is to be expected at this point does not make it any less problematic. *The Wire* does not deal directly with issues of cheating, but it is not hard to imagine some of the teachers we never meet

participating in the various forms of cheating that have been closely documented. Nichols and Berliner describe several of those practices, which include looking at the test beforehand to know what to teach, whispering answers to students during the test, and changing answers after the test to increase scores. It is easy to denounce the cheating of individual students and teachers, but doing so ignores the broader systemic faults that lead to cheating. As Alfie Kohn explains, “[r]eports of such behavior always elicit condemnation of the individuals involved but rarely lead people to rethink the pressures attendant on high-stakes testing” (*The Case Against* 28). The flawed system has tempted countless educators and students to cheat, but that same system has insulated itself against criticism by ensuring that those who try to work around the flaws by cheating will be punished. There is a difference between a teacher who tries to help “a struggling student with one or two challenging test items,” which may in turn “save her job” and one who cheats “to receive a bonus for having a high-achieving class” (Nichols and Berliner 34), but when the former is punished for essentially reacting rationally to an irrational system, the system of high-stakes testing itself becomes the real culprit.

The irony of a test-based accountability system is that, while it is ostensibly aimed to raise student achievement, lower-achieving students often drop out or are pushed out due to the high stakes. There is considerable evidence, for instance, that “some educators have shaped the test-taking pool in their schools or districts through such exclusionary practices as withdrawing students from attendance rolls. Others have purposely demoralized students, causing them to give up in the face of what they accurately perceive to be a hostile school environment” (Nichols and Berliner 57). Again, Campbell’s law predicts this sort of corrupted behavior, but it is apparent that low-achieving students are pushed out of school, whether actively or passively, and that the school doesn’t seem to mind, and actually benefits when they leave, since it can only

help the test scores. In *The Wire*, it is revealed that each student needs to attend only one day of school in September and October for the school to receive its share of state and federal per pupil funding. The administration hires truant officers to make sure each student does their one day, but doesn't seem to care after that. Budgetary concerns are certainly at play, as there is not enough money to permanently hire truant officers, but the lack of effort by school officials to keep all their students in school can certainly be read as an understanding that the absence of those kids will prevent their sure-to-be-low test scores from being counted. Dennis "Cutty" Wise, one of the truant officers hired in *The Wire*, understands the system and, after a short period, refuses to take part in it any longer. He thanks the administration for the opportunity and says he would be happy to bring the kids in and work with them in some way, but just bringing them in for their one day is a sham that isn't worth the time and pay for him, since it isn't going to do the students any good.

Pushing-out efforts can also be more passive. Classroom curricula, as we have seen, are often tailored specifically to the tests, but tests have been found over and over again to be biased in favor of middle-class, White cultural capital. Since the tests themselves are biased, and the tests have, in many cases, become the curricula, the curricula, in turn, are culturally irrelevant as well. When students don't see themselves reflected in the curriculum, and are being forced into rote memorization of material that does not relate to their lives, they understandably lose interest, and "[t]his will have the effect of driving up the already high dropout rates for students from other cultures" (Nichols and Berliner 72). When tests and curricula value dominant cultural capital, those without it, including the students we see in *The Wire*, are at an automatic disadvantage, and, unfortunately, it only helps the school's test scores when those students drop out.

Additionally, poverty and test scores are negatively correlated, meaning, “as the percentage of students who live in poverty increases, the test scores go down” (Johnson and Johnson 194). Even though we really only know four of the students at Tilghman Middle School, it is immediately apparent that the majority of the student population there lives in extreme poverty. Randy seems to have a comfortable living situation with his foster mother, and Namond is a clear exception thanks to the Barksdale money being paid on behalf of his incarcerated father, but Michael, who must take care of his younger brother because their mother is a drug addict, and Dukie, whose whole family seems to be addicts, are living on food stamps and can’t even be sure if they will have clean clothes. Even the kids with relative wealth in the school are still living in an environment of poverty. In episode 4.09, Namond and two other students go out to a fancy dinner with Bunny Colvin, and all three kids are visibly uncomfortable and embarrassed in the high-class restaurant. Despite his expensive video games and new school clothes, Namond still does not possess the cultural capital to know how to order food from a waitress. When economic and cultural poverty are so rampant, low test scores are essentially to be expected.

Ultimately, high-stakes tests are “a policy mechanism attuned to the mindset of many of our citizens in power and thus slip easily into our everyday life” (Nichols and Berliner 22). Test scores are easy to collect and sell to the public, and because the tests are “standardized,” there is a guise of fairness and neutrality. However, as I have argued, the tests themselves are anything but even-handed, and, in fact, work against the students who are most in need of an education. One of the main reasons high-stakes standardized tests continue to play such a large role in the U.S. education system, then, is that it is part of a “self-preserving, privilege-maintaining quest. ... [T]he power elite in this society, along with the vast middle and upper-middle class whose

children now attend good public schools, see high-stakes testing working to their own children's advantage" (Nichols and Berliner 22). Those in power to create educational policy are those who see their own children score well on the tests, and therefore have little incentive to change the system. Even when their children don't do well, they have the resources to tutor and train them, and when less-privileged students fail, it just makes more room for the privileged students to succeed.

Tracking:

Tracking, "the nearly ubiquitous secondary school practice of separating students for instruction by achievement or ability" (Oakes xvi), is another policy that has disproportionately negative effects on low-income students and students of Color and whose consequences have become more enhanced in the era of top-down standardization. Although it is more readily apparent in racially and socioeconomically mixed schools, it is still evident in *The Wire*, where the school is racially isolated and "where lower-level classes predominate" (Oakes xi). Just like high-stakes tests, tracking is used to sort students into pre-defined social groups and to reinforce and perpetuate existing social inequality.

Testing and tracking go hand in hand, since test scores are usually the biggest factor in determining a student's placement. As tracking scholar Jeannie Oakes describes, standardized tests are perfectly constructed to sort students, since "only those things that some people know and others do not" are on the test (10). Therefore, because questions that nearly everybody knows or does not know are left off the tests, it becomes very easy to begin to rank students based on their wide range of scores. The biggest consequence of this ranking system is that, as I discussed above, lower-class students and students of Color are more likely to perform poorly on

tests, and that their poor performance is then viewed as proof of a lower innate intelligence, even though “we simply do not have evidence that such a relationship exists” (Oakes 11). Thus, tracking is largely founded on false assumptions about race and ability and serves only to perpetuate those assumptions by using test scores as the primary factor in track placement. The difficulty, though, lies in the fact that the race and class consequences are largely invisible, because, under the standard system, administrators can claim that all students *should* know the same material, and the intended equality is ultimately more important than measurably unequal effect.

The main evidence of tracking in *The Wire* is a special pilot program, created by Dr. David Parenti, a sociology professor at University of Maryland, that serves ten “corner kids” who are particularly disruptive and underserved in their normal classrooms. Although the administration describes it as a program with a special curriculum and smaller class size to give “the attention you need,” the students see it differently: “We get out of everyone else’s shit. Make you ready for gen. pop. [general prison population]” To the students, school is like a prison, and now they’re being placed in solitary confinement.

When Bunny Colvin asks what tracking is after it comes up at one of their meetings, Dr. Parenti says it’s “a nasty term in education circles” (4.05) because it can suggest reduced expectations for certain students. His assessment is true, but as Oakes has found, “it is the rare school that has no mechanism for sorting students into groups that appear to be alike in ways that make teaching them seem easier. In fact, this is exactly the justification some schools offer for tracking students” (3-4). And, indeed, the administration ultimately approves the pilot program because Colvin argues it will be easier to teach the disruptive corner kids by themselves, and it will help the regular classrooms in turn by removing the biggest disruptions.

Oakes argues that, despite the fact that the assumption “that students learn more or better in homogenous groups ... is almost universally held, it is simply not true” (7). She cites a variety of literature and research supporting her claim that “the replacement of tracking with heterogeneous groups would result in more equity in the daily experiences of students” (211). However, the situation depicted in *The Wire* isn’t tracking as it is generally understood. The kids in the pilot program have indeed been separated from their peers in the normal classes in the hopes of benefiting both groups, but they are not being separated on the basis of perceived academic ability. As Colvin says, “They’re not fools. They know exactly what we expect them to be” (4.09), which speaks to the fact that the school does not expect any of the students, in the pilot program or in the regular classes, to succeed. At least with the pilot program removing the “disturbers,” the teachers in the regular classes can devote less of their time to classroom management and more to teaching, even if it is just teaching the test questions.

Nevertheless, the mayor’s representative views the program simplistically as “tracking, plan and simple. It’s still segregating them ... These would be the children left behind, so to speak.” Colvin’s take is more accurate, though: “We’re leaving them all behind anyway, we just don’t want to admit it.” (4.13). Overall, Tilghman Middle School, like most urban school systems, is dominated by low-track classes and low expectations for learning. As we see in the series, and as Oakes found in her research, students in low-track classes are routinely exposed to “low status” knowledge—for instance, multiplication tables and basic literacy skills—whereas students in high-track classes would be presented with “high-status” knowledge, such as more transferable mathematical concepts, which is “highly valued in the culture and necessary for access to higher education” (Oakes 77). Despite the standardization that is prevalent, high *standards* are not. What the students in *The Wire* were learning, and the intellectual processes

needed to learn it, were basic and carried little cultural capital, and as a result they are left with little chance to move up the social ladder.

Social promotion is another, more subtle, form of tracking on display in *The Wire*. Under the practice, even students who are not prepared academically to graduate to the next grade level are still promoted. Social promotion “keeps children with their age group, preventing classrooms where ten-year-olds and thirteen-year-olds sit side by side—a situation that teachers, parents, and children themselves all prefer to avoid ... [and] it saves school systems money” (Hacsi 145). However, as *The Wire* illustrates, the standardized process of keeping children grouped together only by age is often more damaging than helpful, and helps disprove the myth that Oakes describes that kids learn better when they are in a homogenous group.

Sherrod’s experience in *The Wire* is the best example. Although he has been absent from school for at least a few years, he is placed in the eighth grade due to his age, because it would be “unfair to have older students in lower grades,” according to Ms. Donnelly (4.04). However, Sherrod attends class only once and it is clear from the books he brings home that he is illiterate (he pretends to do his homework in front of Bubbles, a homeless drug addict who acts as Sherrod’s caretaker, with a French-English dictionary and a math textbook). Although grade retention also has its critics, since students who fail the first time around are less likely to be motivated a second time, Sherrod’s experience suggests that social promotion is not a solution, either. If students were all actually at grade-level, it would not be an issue, but as a standardized practice, it keeps students in homogenous groups at the expense of real learning and ignores individual situations that fall outside the standard template.

Test scores and student track placements both contribute to the false idea of school as a meritocracy, as they are thought to be “a reflection of individual merit rather than of some inherited privilege” (Oakes 9), even though there is ample evidence that race, socioeconomic status, gender, and other social factors play a large role in one’s academic success. The trick of standardization and standards-based reform, then, is exactly this cloak of merit: by making test scores and track placements the standard measurements, schools can legitimize dominant cultural capital and set up those students who lack it to fail. The result is that “[t]hose at the bottom of the social and economic ladder climb up through twelve years of ‘the great equalizer,’ Horace Mann’s famous description of public schools, and end up still on the bottom rung” (Oakes 4). Standardization serves to deny a quality education to those students who need it most, rather than to achieve its stated goal of helping all students learn better.

POWER DYNAMICS

“We got our thing, but it’s just part of the big thing.” — Zenobia

Having discussed several school policies that have been direct consequences of a broader system of standardization, I will, in this chapter, discuss how those policies specifically, and how standardization in general, affect those involved in schools. In particular, I will analyze the power dynamics that arise between three distinct groups: administrators, teachers, and students. I will use examples from *The Wire* to illustrate how the experiences of the characters speak to the broader phenomenon of school standardization, and how it serves to structure and reproduce social inequality.

Accountability and Top-Down Control:

The standards-based reform movement has been centered on standardized testing for many reasons: the tests are cheap to produce, they purport to measure students’ knowledge, and the results send clear signals to voters that schools are being held accountable. Chief among those reasons, though, is the accountability that tests ostensibly bring to both those administering them and the students taking them. Test scores are “published in the newspaper and used to determine policy—to the point that they are now the primary way of evaluating public schools” (Kohn, *The Schools Our Children*, 201). This reliance on test scores makes it easy for politicians, administrators, and parents to call for “higher standards,” but puts enormous pressure on teachers and students to produce high scores (as evidenced by the widespread cheating that has been reported, which I discussed in the previous chapter). The irony of this standardization, then, is that it actually works to decentralize responsibility and hold no one in a powerful position of

authority accountable for the failures of the system (Vaught). Teachers “can be evaluated on the basis of their students’ scores and then find their paychecks swollen or shrunk accordingly. Principals can be suspended or fired” (Kohn, *The Schools Our Children*, 96), but the focus never moves far enough up the chain of command to examine those who actually set the standardized policies.

“High standards,” which in the current educational landscape has come to mean “high test scores,” are claimed as a benchmark to ensure that all students are performing at a sufficient level, and serve to legitimate public schools as sites of equal education for all students. Where is the inherent inequality in a single standard, set from the top, that all students are expected to reach? Isn’t it more unequal if we *don’t* expect the same thing from all students? That is exactly the argument used to defend the one-size-fits-all system of standards-based accountability, but it ignores the myriad realities surrounding high-stakes testing. Students are pushed out of school over concerns about their low scores, teachers may be fired for poor performance, and entire schools can be shut down or taken over by the state if they do not make Adequate Yearly Progress.

When urban schools and students of Color, like those featured in *The Wire*, repeatedly fall short of standardized measures of success, it seems clear that there is a flaw in their schooling experiences, not that they are actually less smart than rich White kids in the suburbs. Yet, even though authority remains centralized, with those at the top demanding the same increase in test scores across the board, it is the individual schools and school personnel that are punished when test scores do not live up to those high standards. Accountability in this sense “has come to be a euphemism for more control over what goes on in classrooms by people who aren’t in classrooms” (Kohn, *The Schools Our Children*, 97), and has proven utterly ineffective.

The school system in *The Wire* follows the same pattern of centralized authority and decentralized accountability. Assistant Principal Donnelly makes the majority of the administrative decisions at Tilghman Middle School, and the teachers seem to have a considerable amount of leeway in their classrooms, as long as they devote the time when they are being supervised to teaching the test. However, the mayor and the state board above him clearly have the final authority on issues of funding, hiring/firing, and curriculum. Even though Mayor Carcetti's representatives share few scenes with the Tilghman administration over the course of the season, their demands for a ten-point test score increase and "curriculum alignment," as well as their dismantling of the pilot program for ten of the most difficult students, prove their authority, which comes from downtown. But despite that authority, these upper level policymakers and enforcers bear no responsibility for low test scores or poor education in general.

The teachers in *The Wire* are constantly reminded by the administration, and by each other, that the April test scores will determine whether or not the state takes over the school. Although it is unclear what exactly a state takeover would entail, it is clearly a form of punishment: a sanction against the school for its poor performance, and a veiled statement against the quality of both the students and the teachers. This kind of accountability places the blame on the individuals lower down the chain of command, even though they are following orders from above, and it reinforces the legitimacy of standardized assessments. Under a system of top-down standardization, the system itself is never the culprit. Instead, it gets valorized, with "combinations of terms like 'tough,' 'competitive,' 'world-class,' 'measurable,' 'accountability,' 'standards,' 'results,' and 'raising the bar'" (Kohn, *The Schools Our Children*, 15), while those it betrays get punished.

Unfortunately, the system and the power dynamics it fosters show no sign of slowing down. Decentralization is a consequence of the movement, coupled with standards-based reform, to make schools competitive, independent bodies. President Obama's Race to the Top program has been hailed as a success, and he hopes to pass a law that "raises expectations, challenges failure, [and] rewards success," as part of his vision to "Win the Future" ("FACT SHEET"). Education and schooling are thus framed as a competition, entities to be "won." While it is certainly not a bad thing to expect more from our nation's schools, a system in which schools compete with each other for funding and other resources automatically creates losers—most likely those who are already losing—and "rewarding success" reinscribes the disparity. The schools that most need the money are most likely to fail standardized measurements of achievement, but under the cloak of meritocracy and "standardization," it becomes their own fault.

Ultimately, standardized educational practices result in the higher-ups dictating policy, while holding the individuals lower on the chain responsible for the consequences. Some of the teachers in *The Wire* recognize this; they know the test scores are more assessments of them than of the students, and that teaching to the test is a pointless exercise, in the sense that teaching test material has no bearing on students' actual knowledge or ability. In their relatively powerless positions, though, they have no control over school policy and are forced to follow the orders from the top, or else risk losing their jobs. Compliance is assured in a system where deviants are punished, and thus standardization is self-propelled.

School as Prison:

Alfie Kohn argues that there are two main ways to enact change in schools. One, the support model, posits that “[s]tudents are not expected to take responsibility for their own learning but are actively assisted in doing so” (*The Schools Our Children*, 93). On the other hand is the demand model, in which “those outside—and, figuratively speaking, above—the classroom decide what people in it are required to do” (93). It is the latter that perfectly describes the current standards-based reform movement, but, contrary to popular belief, “[t]elling teachers exactly what to do and then holding them ‘accountable’ for the results does not reflect a commitment to excellence. It reflects a commitment to an outmoded, top-down model of control...” (95). In fact, the top-down control creates such a stifling learning environment that many students, particularly those of Color and of low socioeconomic status, come to view school as a prison, a feeling only exacerbated by the fact that schools both “mirror and reinforce the practices and ideological systems of other institutions in the society” (Ferguson 231) and “feed into the prison system” (Ferguson 230).

Under a standardized system, administrators are forced to police their teachers, and, more importantly, both have to police the students. *The Wire* makes clear links between schools and prison/policing in its imagery and its plots. In the first episode of the season, before the school year has even started, the teachers are attending a professional development presentation on the importance of “I.A.L.A.C.” (I Am Loveable and Capable). Not only is it a pointless pedagogical exercise—as many teachers point out, being lovable and capable does not help when your students are throwing pencil sharpeners at you during class—but it is intercut with scenes at the Western Police District, where the officers are undergoing similar textbook training. The parallel

between teachers and police is clearly made, and, at the same time, the scenes speak to the ineffectiveness of standardized teaching and learning practices.

The students in *The Wire* understand their place in school as being similar to that of inmates in prison. Those in the pilot program saw the special class as a preparation for “gen. pop.,” solitary confinement in a larger prison structure. When Ms. Donnelly, the assistant principal, first pulled students out of their regular classes for the pilot program, Zenobia, a young Black girl and one of the few females in the program, replied to the request to “Come with us” with “Story of our lives.” Even Dukie, who comes from a family of drug addicts and who seemed to be quiet and avoided trouble, first responded to Prez’s request to “Come with me, please,” by questioning, “What’d I do?” To these students, the teachers and administrators are not benevolent educators, but rather dominant guards who monitor and punish them. Bunny Colvin, the police officer who became an educational research assistant, is perhaps the only adult to clearly articulate the unequal power dynamic: “Building’s the system, we’re the cops.”

Of course, “standardization” and Kohn’s demand model do not result in this same type of policing for students of all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Instead, “images of black male criminality and the demonization of black children play a significant role in framing actions and events in the justice system in a way that is similar to how these images are used in school to interpret the behavior of individual miscreants. In both settings, the images result in differential treatment based on race” (Ferguson 232). Students like those in *The Wire* are practically expected to fail out of school and become criminals, and they know it. Individual teachers, like Prez, may take a special interest in certain students or try to work around the institutional restrictions, but those steps are not enough to combat a system that constantly names, regulates,

and surveils youth of Color as “troublemakers” and denies them full educational resources (Ferguson 230).

Surveillance is an important part of the classifying and differentiating of students (Ferguson). Test scores are widely used to sort students, but track placements are also “influenced by such things as teachers’ perceptions of student appearance, behavior, and social background” (Ferguson 53-4). Since students of Color are often expected to be troublemakers, they are more closely watched, and thus get in trouble more often, and their troublemaker status can then be used to justify low academic tracks and further surveillance. In *The Wire*, surveillance is a constant theme. The title of the series itself refers to the wiretaps used by the police in drug investigations, and the opening credits of each season contain many images of cameras and video footage. In the school, security guards are a steady presence and teachers and administrators regularly patrol the halls, asking stray students for hall passes if they are not in class. But even if the surveillance methods are standardized, the responses are not. It has been shown that “African American males are apprehended and punished for misbehavior and delinquent acts that are overlooked in other children. The punishment that is meted out is usually more severe than that for other children” (Ferguson 233). The standardized model of instruction that is supposed to be one-size-fits-all instead leads teachers and administrators to police their students and disproportionately punish those who are already systematically disadvantaged. Indeed, Black students must often “distan[c]e themselves from ‘Blackness,’ which is represented as trouble and the disruption of order” (Ferguson 212) in order to conform to the school’s expectations for proper behavior.

The “top-down coercion,” as Kohn (*The Schools Our Children*) calls it, of standards-based school reform disproportionately affects students of Color due to deficit thinking, “one of

the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in US schools” (Yosso 75). Deficit thinking “takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: (a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and (b) parents neither value nor support their child’s education” (Yosso 75). Students who lack dominant cultural capital are expected to change to meet the demands of the supposedly equal and equitable education system, rather than the other way around. And when they fail to do so, as urban dropout rates show they so often do, it is framed as their own fault. If they had been able to adjust to and adopt the standardized, dominant, White school values, such as proper English and more conservative clothing (Ferguson), maybe things would have turned out differently, but as it stands, those students are systematically targeted from the start and set up to fail and turn to a life outside the accepted norm.

And, indeed, many of the students in *The Wire* end up as criminals, drug addicts, or even dead. Michael, the young boy who had to provide for his little brother and who we learn was sexually abused as a child, becomes a stick-up boy, robbing drug dealers at gunpoint, and it isn’t hard to imagine him eventually meeting the same fate as his spiritual predecessor, Omar, a Robin Hood-esque thief who stole from drug dealers and was eventually shot and killed by a neighborhood youth. Dukie turns to drugs after he graduates to high school, but he never even attends one day due to his lack of any support system. Wallace, who was killed in the first season, Poot, and Bodie are three young drug dealers shown living in the projects in season one, and they have all dropped out of school and have resigned themselves to a life slinging drugs. Standardized school structures force compliance or exclusion, and when poor students of Color start off with deficient cultural capital, the latter option is the more likely result. And when

combined with the effects of top-down surveillance efforts, which create an environment more akin to a prison than a school, that likelihood becomes even greater.

Black/White Divide:

One of the biggest buzzwords in education circles today is the “achievement gap,” the apparent difference between achievement levels of White students and students of Color. It is usually measured in terms of test scores, and districts can claim they are “closing the achievement gap” when the scores of students of Color increase and approach those of White students. The idea that standardized test scores are measuring achievement and education is problematic, for, as I discussed in the previous chapter, standardized tests rarely measure what they claim to, and they are rife with inherent cultural biases. However, the basic idea that an achievement gap exists is fair. Research has shown that students of Color are disproportionately and negatively impacted by policies of standardization. They are more likely to be subject to what Freire describes as the banking model of education, which results in very little real learning, and which leads to an increased likelihood of dropping out of high school and a decreased rate of university enrollment (Kozol 282). Thus the achievement gap is very real, even if the techniques used to measure it are not necessarily reliable or accurate. It is in the efforts to close the achievement gap that the real problems lay.

Under a standardized system, closing the achievement gap becomes a paradoxical endeavor. Race is recognized and singled out, as the sorting of test scores by racial group and the mere definition of the achievement gap make immediately evident. However, teachers and administrators are expected to assume a colorblind attitude and treat all students equally, as if they did not see racial difference. The same institution that decries the widespread failure of

students of Color (which, in itself, implies a natural deficiency) simultaneously claims not to even see Color, as if any recognition of difference produces inherent inequality. In truth, though, the claim that race is no longer relevant only contributes to the sort of “New Racism” (Bonilla-Silva) that continues to reproduce racial inequality. Color-blind ideology is shrouded in liberal rhetoric that claims equality as a goal, but necessarily ignores the fact that “racial considerations shade almost everything in America” (Bonilla-Silva 1).

Colorblindness is similar to the American idea of the melting pot, in that “the declaration of colorblindness assumes that we can erase our racial categories, ignore differences, and thereby achieve an illusory state of sameness or equality. ... The proponents of colorblindness assume that the mere perception of difference is a problem” (Howard 57). Colorblindness ignores the historical, political, and social contexts that make race relevant in today’s society. It looks only at formal race—“socially constructed formal categories [where] Black and white are seen as neutral, apolitical descriptions, reflecting merely ‘skin color’ or region of ancestral origin” (Gotanda 257)—and does not recognize the social, political, historical, and cultural components of race in America. An ahistorical, apolitical and acontextual colorblindness thus “legitimizes and thereby maintains the social, economic, and political advantages that whites hold over other Americans” (Gotanda 257), allowing whites to maintain white supremacy and the existing power dynamics in this country.

Of course, colorblindness functions more openly in diverse schools, where treating all students the same means treating them all like the White kids. Because *The Wire* is set in an all-Black school, and we only really see a couple of teachers over the course of the season, we do not get a good look at the typical “I don’t see color” perspective that epitomizes colorblindness. Colorblind attitudes and the general approaches of White teachers in an all-Black school are still

evident in several classroom scenes, however. On the first day of school (4.03), Prez introduces a math lesson using an example involving a student named Andre. He did make an effort to pick what might be considered a “Black” name that his students would be familiar with, but when the students asked him if Andre was from the Westside or Eastside, Prez replied, “it doesn’t make any difference.” In his White, dominance-oriented perspective, Prez could not understand why the side of town Andre was on would affect the problem, since it had no bearing on the math itself. The students made it clear, though, that in their world, that kind of distinction mattered. By coming into the school with his outsider perspective, and teaching the lesson as he would teach any group of kids, Prez did not account for the very real racial and cultural differences between his students and him. Although perhaps not the typical example of colorblindness, since Prez did make some effort to make the lesson more culturally relevant, the experience is nonetheless representative of the standard White culture of U.S. schools affecting curriculum and teaching methods, even in those schools completely or predominantly populated by students of Color, and is significant in the students’ recognition that where they come from certainly does matter.

Additionally, in response to that standardized White school culture, “[a]s a result of their subordinate position, blacks have formed an identity system that is perceived and experienced not merely as different from but *in opposition* to the social identity of their white dominators” (McLaren 228). Although top-down instructions tell teachers to treat all students equally (read: the same, like White kids), students recognize the disconnect between the message and the practice and will actively resist the uneven racial power dynamic. I will discuss issues of resistance more in the next chapter as it relates to student engagement in learning, but it warrants mention here that racial differences result in more than simply authoritative domination. As *The Wire*’s depiction of Namond, the young boy whose father is incarcerated and whose mother is

pushing him to a life selling drugs, illustrates, students may understand the confinements of the school system, and try to use them to their advantage. Namond becomes loud and disrespectful at one point in the hopes of getting suspended, because “school gotta have rules,” and a suspension would give him the chance to get out of the prison-like environment for a couple of days. Obviously, he would not be academically challenged on the streets, but he arguably wouldn’t be learning anything better in the classroom, and at least outside of school he would not be expected to conform to White cultural norms. His resistance is ultimately a tool to undercut the oppressive power dynamics built into the school system through a policy of standardization and an expectation of colorblindness.

The standards-based reform movement is predicated on the idea that there is one form of education that works best for all students, and it is easily measured by a standardized form of assessment. Such a system results in severely unequal power dynamics, though, and places an inordinate amount of power in the hands of decision makers at the top of the chain of command. Those making the decisions insulate themselves and the system as a whole by decentralizing accountability, all the while keeping authority highly centralized. A one-size-fits-all system also leads to, paradoxically, increased surveillance and “policing” of students of Color by teachers and administrators (Ferguson 61-65) and, at the same time, a colorblind approach to teaching.

Although students do resist their position at the bottom of the ladder, their resistance will most likely lead to their exit from the system altogether. Marla Daniels, the estranged wife of police lieutenant Cedric Daniels who later runs for city council, in episode 1.02, says, “You cannot lose if you do not play.” While it may be true in the world of police politics, it doesn’t seem to apply to school, if only because it is possible to lose either way. Students who do not

“play” at all, by dropping out or being suspended, are not faced with academic failure in the same way as a student who fails a test is, but they “lose” by being even further removed from the legitimate power structure. And students who “play,” but logically resist their subordinate position in the school, are automatically not playing by the rules, and the only option for rule breakers is punishment. By excluding anyone who does not fit in the White dominant school culture, labeling them criminals and troublemakers, schools only further legitimate their unequal practices.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

“At least before they were getting something out of it.” — Prez

Thus far, I have discussed several school policies that have been direct consequences of a broader system of standardization, and how those policies engender unequal power dynamics between administrators, teachers, and students. In this chapter, I will approach the issue of student engagement in learning and how policies of standardization ultimately restrict many students’ involvement with their educations. I will use examples from *The Wire* to illustrate how the experiences of the characters act as a lens into the broader phenomenon of school standardization, and how that standardization serves to structure and reproduce social inequality.

Inclusive Classrooms:

The first step to having engaged students is creating environments where they actually want to learn. Beverly Daniel Tatum, the current president of Spelman College and a psychologist who studies the development of racial identity, argues that in order to help all students succeed, schools need to create “inclusive learning environments—environments that acknowledge the continuing significance of race and racial identity in ways that can empower and motivate students to transcend the legacy of racism in our society even when the composition of their classrooms continues to reflect it” (21). She calls her main three points her “ABCs”:

A, affirming identity, refers to the fact that students need to see themselves—important dimensions of their identity—reflected in the environment around them, in the curriculum, among the faculty and staff, and in the faces of their

classmates, to avoid the feelings of invisibility or marginality that can undermine student success. *B*, building community, refers to the importance of creating a school community in which everyone has a sense of belonging, a community in which there are shared norms and values as well as a sense of common purpose that unites its members. *C*, cultivating leadership, refers to the role of education in preparing citizens for active participation in a democracy, and the assumption that leadership must come from all parts of our community. (21-2)

All three of these aspects must be present in a school for it to be considered an effective learning environment for all students. However, when schools are so often mired in dominant culture, even the first step of affirming identity is a relative rarity, and building community and cultivating leadership are even more difficult to achieve.

Standardized practices serve to normalize the “hidden curriculum” that “includes such taken-for-granted components of instruction as differences in modes of social control and the regulation of relations of authority, and the valorization of certain forms of linguistic and cultural expression” (Ferguson 50). The hidden curriculum “reflects the ‘cultural hegemony’ [social dominance and normalizing] of the dominant class and works to reinforce and reproduce that dominance by exacerbating and multiplying—rather than diminishing or eliminating—the ‘inequalities’ children bring from home and neighborhood to school” (Ferguson 50). When standards are created and passed down from the top, they will likely reflect the cultural capital of the dominant class, and schools have to follow them even if they do not share that dominant culture. In those classrooms, where the majority of students do not possess the dominant cultural capital, there becomes a fundamental disconnect between the curriculum they are expected to learn and the material that is relevant to their lives. As Tatum argues, “Our ability to engage our

students in the kind of education they need, and that our society requires, depends on this foundational concept [affirming identity] from which all else can flow” (23). In those classrooms where identities are not being affirmed, due to a standardized dominant-culture curriculum, students are simply much less likely to be engaged in learning.

In *The Wire*, students are repeatedly depicted as learning better when the material relates to their lives. After struggling to convey a math lesson to his students, Prez decides to try a different approach. He gathers all the dice he can find in the school supply room and uses dice games to teach probability. They are a hit with the students, who view the lesson as a fun activity rather than as a tutorial, and when Prez eventually tells them they have to get back to learning test material, they become markedly disinterested. It is clear that the students learn more from the dice than from the mandated test curriculum, though. When Randy, an eighth-grade foster child with aspirations of one day owning his own store, asks Prez to order him candy online, so he can continue his secret cafeteria snack business, he brings Prez cash that he won on the streets playing dice. “Schooled me good, Mr. P,” he says, recognizing his application of a school lesson to his real life. The secret, according to Prez: “Trick ‘em into thinking they aren’t learning, and they do.”

Bunny Colvin, the research assistant in the “corner kid” pilot program and former police officer, also notices the fundamental disconnect between the material the students are expected to learn in school and what they expect of themselves: “They’re not learning for our world, they’re learning for theirs.” In the pilot program, when the lessons relate to dominant culture (for instance, how to order at a restaurant, reading a curriculum-approved story), the students are defiant and often refuse to participate. However, when they frame the class discussion around what it means to be a good corner boy, the students are talkative and involved. It may seem

obvious that the students would be more apt to talk about their lives, but the same principle held true when they had to work in teams to construct replicas of famous monuments. At first, nobody was interested, but when Colvin challenged them to bring their corner work ethic and teamwork to the classroom, they did. As pedagogy scholars Beliveau and Bolf-Beliveau explain:

The school-within-a-school activities offer the corner kids a variety of opportunities to change their educational experience. ... [T]he students' lives outside the school are presented and discussed inside the school. Students are encouraged to affix words, descriptions, and understandings of the system of the streets, experiences that are usually excluded from institutional context. This offers the students an opportunity to author and own their experience within the classroom, and at the same time to establish a legitimate connection between the students and the people in the institution—especially Colvin. (96)

Even the simplest effort to put the lesson or discussion in terms of the students' lives paid off, and resulted in noticeably higher engagement. The students greatly benefited not only from seeing their lives reflected in their classroom, but also from being given the opportunity to forge those connections themselves. *The Wire* may take narrative liberties, in that creating culturally-relevant lessons is not necessarily as easy as Prez and Colvin make it appear, but research has shown that those real-life connections do make a difference in student engagement.

Just as relevant links to one's life and culture can increase student engagement, the wrong links can completely cut off any learning. As Tatum states, "We know that 'how learners feel about the setting they are in, the respect they receive from the people around them, and their ability to trust their own thinking and experience powerfully influence their concentration, their imagination, their effort, and their willingness to continue'" (29). Simply being presented with

generic links is not enough; they need to have a meaningful connection to the material. In *The Wire*, a math problem involving an allowance is posed. The first reaction Zenobia, one of the few female students in the pilot program, has, though, is not confusion about the numbers or the concept—it is that she doesn't get what an allowance is. She cannot even attempt to solve the problem when there is such a disconnect between it and her life. Similarly, Prez's math problem involving fictional student Andre shows how much the students' connection to the material matters. At first, Prez said it made no difference whether Andre was from the Westside or Eastside, but, clearly, it mattered to the students: until Prez told them Andre was from the Westside, they didn't care about him, and therefore didn't care about the math problem. In yet another example, students are easily able to perform simple arithmetic when it is framed as “the count” (drug money). Half of \$7? \$3.50. But half of seven? They cannot come up with an answer. Eventually, Dr. Parenti, the University of Maryland professor leading the pilot program, laments, “This material doesn't speak to their world,” with the implication that the lack of connection to their lives is presented as the reason for the students' disengagement from school.

Because real-world students also need to relate to what they are learning and to feel comfortable in their schools, affirming identity is the most important step in creating inclusive classrooms. But even efforts to affirm identity have to be more than just token concessions. This becomes especially important for students of Color in racially homogeneous schools, since “[t]hey may be seeing themselves among their classmates, but they may not be seeing themselves in the curriculum in meaningful and substantive ways” (Tatum 29). However, as curricula become more and more standardized—some to the point of being literally scripted, with to-the-minute instructions on what to say (Chan)—teachers will have less of a chance to

incorporate culturally-relevant lessons into their classrooms, leaving those students who are most out of touch with the material at a substantial loss.

Of course, standardized curricula are not the only things holding teachers back from affirming their students' identities and creating inclusive classrooms. Assessments in the form of standardized tests are biased, "necessarily steeped in prior cultural assumptions—norms—that favor some kids over others. . . . The test must discriminate and rank order on some basis" (Meier, *In Schools* 111). Students of Color are less likely to perform as well as White students on standardized tests because of the inherent biases, thus when classroom lessons are structured around the subject matter on the tests (as I discussed in the section about "teaching to the test") students of Color are going to be less engaged.

And more often than not, White teachers are teaching students of Color in urban school districts (Tatum 25-6). While it is not impossible for those White teachers to "transcend our shared history to affirm rather than assault student identities," it does take "considerable effort and intention" (Tatum 26). But when teachers are concentrating on teaching standardized test material so they can boost test scores and save their jobs, and the basic school philosophy follows Freire's "banking model," there is not a lot of leeway for teachers to devote time to developing positive identity-affirming beliefs and pedagogy. That is not to say it is not possible—a racially mixed "magnet" school in suburban Atlanta (Tatum 22) effectively displayed all three ABCs—but when so much time is spent trying to meet standardized requirements, the students who are already least engaged are not likely to suddenly become more interested.

Racialized Exclusion:

Given how rare it is for teachers and curricula to create comprehensive inclusive, identity-affirming classrooms, let alone the difficulty of building community and cultivating leadership, the burden often falls on students of Color and of low socioeconomic status—those lacking dominant cultural capital—to “‘make themselves over’ to succeed in school and to accumulate the cultural capital that is the prerequisite for achievement. They must get rid of the unwanted baggage brought from the streets, the family, the neighborhood” (Ferguson 203). Students of Color recognize that the cultural capital of Whiteness is that which is valued in school settings, and they understand that they must embrace it and at least partially reject their own cultural capital in order to succeed academically.

This phenomenon, “acting white” (Ferguson 203), is a case of schools necessarily rejecting, rather than affirming, the identities of students of Color. Ferguson describes the findings of multiple ethnographic studies, which conclude that being a “good” student ultimately equates with “acting white,” and that the “not-so-subtle insinuation [is] that for students to do well in school they must cut themselves off from blackness by positioning themselves as white. Indeed, the researchers suggest that fear of being accused of ‘acting white’ by peers is a significant factor in deterring a number of youth from adopting the behavior required for success” (203). As I have discussed, if we expect all students to learn and be engaged academically, it is of paramount importance to provide them with a curriculum that reflects their lives and with teachers and administrators who reflect the same and provide meaningful understanding of different backgrounds. In a standardized system, though, when the curricula are often “sanitized versions of U.S. history that distort reality ... and obliterate the presence of so many” (Tatum 34), we expect the students to adjust to their circumstances, rather than the system

itself to adjust to the different students it is serving. Ultimately, it is not hard to understand why low-income students and students of Color often become disengaged, when they are constantly struggling to renegotiate their identities to fit in with the dominant school culture, where their lives are not validated.

Indeed, there is evidence that motivation and excitement about school begin to decline around fourth grade, especially for African American boys, in what has been termed “the fourth-grade syndrome.” At this point, Black males “begin to disidentify with school and to look to other sources for self-validation. ... [T]his diminishing motivation to identify as a ‘scholar’ is a consequence of the inhospitable culture of school that African American children encounter, rather than a consequence of peer pressure” (Ferguson 204). In *The Wire*, the students are in eighth grade, so we are unable to see the specific point at which they become disengaged in their academics, but it is easy to see that by the time they have reached the end of middle school, most of them are only attending classes because it is a way to get out of their homes and off the streets for most of the day. Whenever the standard lessons—often those in line with the standardized tests—are taught, the students are practically sleeping at their desks, and Randy makes clear, when he repeatedly slips out of class to sneak to the cafeteria to promote his underground snack business, that his interests lay elsewhere. Of course, when the lessons are relevant (dice games, corner boy discussion, comparing arm span and height in relation to boxing reach), interest and engagement will tick up, but that is the exception rather than the norm. None of the students we get to know “acts White,” so we are unable to see how other students react to that particular phenomenon, but the fact that none of the main students adopts that behavior seems to serve as an example of the oppositional culture they do adopt and speak to the stifling school environment they experience.

In fact, student engagement directly links to the power dynamics I discussed in the previous chapter. Standardized, top-down practices, such as the surveillance and policing procedures often seen in low-performing urban schools, are just some of the “punitive and overzealous tools and approaches of the modern criminal justice system [that] have seeped into our schools, serving to remove children from mainstream educational environments and funnel them onto a one-way path toward prison” (NAACP). These policies, together called the school-to-prison pipeline (which the NAACP considers “one of the most urgent challenges in education today” in its 2005 report), both cause and affect low student engagement and unequal power dynamics. Because students of Color are often labeled “bad” and “criminals,” as I discussed in the previous chapter, they will become disengaged and disillusioned with school, and as they become thus disengaged, teachers and administrators feel they must increase their monitoring, essentially turning the situation into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Zero-tolerance policies in particular have been criticized for being “disciplinary methods that remove students from school ... [and do] nothing to teach children positive behavior” (NAACP). Furthermore, the suspensions and expulsions that arise from such policies are often “for minor conduct that is typical, adolescent behavior” (NAACP). This kind of policy is found disproportionately in low-performing schools with high populations of students of Color and is a clear example of a standardized, one-size-fits-all procedure that is least flexible with the students it affects most.

In *The Wire*, it is evident that the students understand the rules and consequences of breaking them. There is no apparent “zero-tolerance” policy, but suspension is clearly a common punishment with which many of the students are familiar. For their part, though, the school administrators do seem to understand the danger of suspensions, as “[s]tudies have shown that a

child who has been suspended is more likely to be retained in grade, to drop out, to commit a crime, and/or to end up incarcerated as an adult” (NAACP). When Assistant Principal Donnelly catches Randy skipping class, she bargains with him, letting him avoid suspension if he gives her details on recent in-school vandalism and crime. Bunny Colvin and the other teachers in the pilot program even more clearly combat the types of policies that easily lead children to disengage from school and get caught up in the juvenile justice system. They take away suspension as a possible punishment, opting instead to simply send students to the principal’s office if they disrupt class. Namond, whose father is in prison and whose mother is pushing him toward a drug career, in an attempt to get out of school for a few days, loudly reacts, shouting “School gotta have rules!” However, he quickly learns that such outbursts won’t get him the days off he wants, and he instead begins to engage more with the lessons, and, with some prodding from Colvin, becomes one of the few students who gets approved to move back into regular classes at the end of the semester. I repeat this example from the chapter two section “Black/White Divide” not only because it illustrates both points, but also because it links the ways in which standardization affects both power dynamics and student engagement. Namond’s outburst is his way of resisting the stifling, unequal power dynamic within the school, and also makes evident his lack of engagement, as he would rather leave school than have to sit through another class period.

Standardized curricula and school culture often leave little room for new material and approaches, which ultimately leads students who are unrepresented in those curricula and cultures to become disengaged with the material. This disinterest, when combined with the unequal power dynamics that result from structures of surveillance and policing, largely serves to funnel students out of schools and into the criminal justice system. Students often recognize the forces, both tangible and invisible, working against them, which may “produce the condition in

many of active ‘not-learning’ (Ferguson 204), but the end result is the same: the students most in need of a meaningful education are left without it.

Alternative Learning Environments:

Just because low-performing students are pushed out of schools does not mean they do not learn. In school, those students may take part in “‘active not-learning,’ the conscious effort of obviously intelligent students to expend their time and energy in the classroom actively distancing themselves from schoolwork, thereby short-circuiting the trajectory of school failure altogether” (Ferguson 99), as a way of resisting the hostile environment. As they move from formal school settings to other more compelling and welcoming locales, though, they will continue to learn, often for the same reasons they were disengaged from school.

As much as *The Wire* focuses on the school system in season four, it argues that just as much learning, if not more, is happening outside the school walls. Michael, the eighth-grade boy who must take care of his younger brother because their drug-addict mother is not capable, and several other young boys train at the gym run by Cutty (who also acted as a truant officer for a short period), learning the discipline and skills it takes to become a boxer. Namond learns from his mother and Bodie, a local drug lieutenant, what it takes to be a corner boy, as he gets his own drug package to sell on the streets. Michael eventually falls under the tutelage of Marlo, the local drug kingpin, and Chris and Snoop, his enforcers, all of whom teach him how to be a “soldier” for the gang. Dukie, whose family has been known to sell his clothes for drug money, gets a lesson from local birdkeeper Nemo about pigeons as he helps him clean the coops.

Alternative learning environments like those depicted in *The Wire* largely succeed for the reasons schools have failed the same kids. The lessons they are learning are often culturally relevant, and are taught by people who share many of the same values and who simply look like them. In these environments, they are not expected to fail and are not labeled criminals and troublemakers. Instead, the kids engage because they get to “own” their work and, as basic as it may seem, have fun, two significant factors that affect engagement (Newmann et al.). Kids are going to learn, it’s just a matter of where and what, and when schools are set up to cause disengagement, it’s no surprise that the “where” is often an alternative setting.

“Students can’t be compelled to learn, only invited and encouraged and helped” (Kohn, *The Schools Our Children* 66). As I have discussed, though, the schools serving students of Color and of low socioeconomic backgrounds are often not doing enough to encourage and help their students be motivated to learn. Standardized curricula, some to the point of being literally scripted, restrict even the most dedicated and motivated teachers, and leave little room for more culturally relevant material. As students recognize the restrictions placed on them, they will often actively resist school as an institution, which serves only to affirm the system’s preconceived notion of these students as criminals and deviants. This, in turn, leads to increased surveillance, harsher punishments, and then further disengagement—a self-propelling cycle.

And indeed, the students in *The Wire* mostly end up outside the formal school system and on their way to the criminal justice system. Randy, through a long series of events, gets placed in a group home where he is beaten up for his reputation as a snitch, and where there seems to be little to no adult support. Dukie never attends high school after he graduates from eighth grade, opting instead to work the corner with Michael, and ends the series shooting up heroin, on his

way to become the next Bubbles, a homeless heroin addict for much of the series. Michael continues to work with Marlo's gang until he parts ways with them and picks up Omar's torch as a stick-up boy robbing other drug dealers. All of the boys are smart, and under the right circumstances, all of them had shown interest and engagement with the material in Prez's class. The cumulative effect of the system, though, was to push them out. As Ms. Donnelly, the assistant principal, tells Prez, "You do your piece and you let them go." One piece, though, however good it may be, is not enough. If the support is not there from the curriculum, the teachers, the administrators, or the other students, how can we expect these kids to succeed?

CONCLUSION

“When do this shit change?” — Bunny Colvin

No Child Left Behind and the high-stakes standardized tests it ushered in are the hallmarks of the current standards-based reform movement, but they are far from the whole picture. As I have shown, standardization encompasses a wide range of top-down, one-size-fits-all procedures that have far-reaching consequences for our students, particularly poor students of Color who are most in need of a quality education. Standardization has led most clearly to high-stakes testing, which, alone, has engendered widespread cheating and narrowed curricula, but it has also affected the ways in which students and teachers interact (that is, adults shift from their primary role as educators, becoming monitors and surveillance forces) and the ways in which students engage in their learning (in many cases, by simply disengaging).

It seems clear that standards-based reform is not working, and that more standardization is not the solution to our nation’s education problems, yet talk of greater accountability and higher test scores remains. Standardization plays into the idea of school as “the great equalizer” (MacLeod 11), since, by its very definition, standardized practices should create an even playing field. What we have seen, though, is that while standardization at its face value assumes the guise of “equal and equitable,” its effects are anything but that. More than anything, standardized tests are sorting mechanisms for students and teachers. Because of the unequal power dynamics that result from a standardized system, schools are likely to become hostile environments to students who are outside the norm—the very students the system is ostensibly set up to educate and protect.

The achievement ideology, central to the American Dream, states that hard work is the key to one's success, and institutional structures are largely ignored. "High standards" contribute further to this "myth of meritocracy," which states that those who succeed and fail do so because of their own efforts. The narrative becomes one of certain students—overwhelmingly those of Color and low socioeconomic status—failing to meet standards that other (middle-class White) students can easily meet, because they are not as smart or as motivated or because they have bad teachers. Talk of the Achievement Gap is evidence that the racial disparities are noticed, but that the discussion is always focused on improving teachers or motivating students means that the focus is not on improving the wider system as a whole and making it more hospitable to an entire population of underserved students.

Of course, some students do "make it," despite their unfavorable circumstances. The depiction of Namond, whose mother had been pushing him toward a life in the drug trade, from *The Wire* is the perfect example of the exception that "proves" the rule regarding meritocracy and social mobility. Of the four main students in the fourth season, Namond is the only one to succeed academically and continue his schooling past eighth grade. Although he started off as one of the most resistant and "troublemaking" students, he did show progressively more and more commitment to and investment in his schoolwork. He certainly earned his success, and I don't mean to imply otherwise. However, his success was largely a case of good luck: through the pilot program, he grew close to Bunny Colvin, and Colvin, as a former police officer, helped him out of several situations that would have otherwise ended with Namond in juvenile detention. Ultimately, Colvin appeals directly to Namond's convict father, pointing out that the boy is not built to be a "solider" on the streets like his father was. Colvin and his wife take Namond in as their adoptive son, sending him to a better high school and imparting upon him

their middle-class values regarding education. Namond does get out of his high poverty, low expectation life in inner-city Baltimore, but his was the special case that could not translate to other students.

On the other side, Dukie, Randy, and Michael all fail to get out of their bad situations, and only end up worse. Ironically, the three of them were arguably the best students in Prez's class. The fact that they were not placed in the pilot program shows they were not the "worst" of the bunch, and their attitudes in math class showed that they were, indeed, smart kids who just needed to be properly engaged. On top of it all, these three were especially sympathetic characters whom the audience wanted to see succeed. Nobody was necessarily rooting against Namond, but the other three boys were all more likeable and their success would have been more expected. That Namond was the one to "make it," then, speaks to the falseness of the achievement ideology. His success is an example of holding up "the self-made individual as 'proof' that barriers to success are purely personal" (MacLeod 242), but when the circumstances surrounding his success, as well as those surrounding the others' failures, are truly examined, it becomes clear that individual hard work or lack thereof had very little to do with it. One student made it while the others fell off the radar, because that's how the American public school system operates. The occasional success story allows the American Dream to maintain some semblance of efficacy, but, by and large, students lacking the dominant cultural capital end up in their same social locations, with little chance for improvement.

Standardization only exacerbates the problem by limiting what teachers and administrators can do. They are expected to closely follow the instructions and curricula handed down from the central leadership at top, leaving them little room to adjust their lessons or procedures in any large-scale way. If a particular teacher does find a way to work around the

system (as Prez did in *The Wire*, only teaching test questions when he was being observed, but always keeping a sample question on the board just in case), he or she is just one cog in a larger machine. As Ms. Donnelly says to Prez in episode 4.12, “You do your piece and you let them go.” She was specifically referencing the close bond Prez had developed with Dukie, who was clearly neglected by his family, but the same principle holds true across the board. The entire school system needs to be working together to improve, rather than expecting single standout teachers and administrators to try to change the whole system on their own.

The intent of this thesis is not to prescribe sweeping reforms to our education crisis, but rather to document and analyze how the current practices of standardization are only exacerbating the already widespread inequality built into schools. However, there are some relatively simple steps we can take that I will briefly discuss. By “simple,” I do not mean they would be easily implemented—indeed, the ideas are so flexible and counter to the notion of standardization that they would surely be opposed by many within and outside of education circles—but, conceptually, they are changes that would not require a radical overhaul of public schools, but rather a slight recalibrating of the ways in which we think about assessment and leadership.

Starting narrowly with the topic of assessment, Ted Sizer, a long-time education reform advocate and founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools, proposed an expansion of the types of tools we use to assess students’ learning. He noted that, “Tests, or any exhibition of mastery (I prefer that positive term, the student’s opportunity to show off rather than his trial by question), are troublesome mechanisms. But the alternative to them—no basis to describe or assess what school is for—simply is worse. A sensible school would have a variety of means for exhibition—timed tests, essays, oral exams, portfolios of work” (68). Standardized high-stakes tests are often

cited as one of the biggest problems in the current era of standards-based reform, and while that is probably true, doing away with all tests is not the answer. Just as there is a difference between “standards” (guidelines for what students should know) and “standardization” (a one-size-fits-all model with top-down control), so is there a distinction between assessments and high-stakes testing. WhatSizer advocated is a comprehensive process that would allow students to truly show what they do and do not know. The different methods would demonstrate the extent to which students have mastered the broad skills and knowledge he thinks are necessary—the “substance” of their schooling—without subjecting them to just a single test with great consequences attached to it. Logistically, the time it would take to monitor and assess the various exhibitions Sizer describes would be more than most teachers could handle under the current structure, but, as he says, “those hours are better so spent than continuing with the known inadequacies of the status quo” (68). Yes, standardized tests are cheaper and easier to run through a computer, but, ultimately, what they tell us about what students truly know is very little and is far outweighed by the amount of time teachers spend teaching to the test and by the overall negative consequences such tests have on the students who have the most difficulty with them. What standardized tests “primarily seem to be measuring is how much a student has crammed into his short-term memory” (Kohn, *The Schools Our Children*, 80), whereas assessments like Sizer’s will encourage full “*use of the mind*” (216) and provide an incentive for students to take control of their learning.

Broadening the scope beyond merely assessment, in her book *In Schools We Trust*, Deborah Meier proposes changes to the “standardization and bureaucratization [that] undermine the possibilities for the kind of education we all claim is sorely lacking” (2), to restore trust in the American public school system. Meier’s vision is of democratic learning communities, where

“teachers are encouraged to talk to each other ... [p]arents meet with teachers frequently and press for their own viewpoint ... [k]ids learn the art of democratic conversation ... [p]rincipals are partners with their faculties and have the respect of their communities” (4). The decision-making power needs to reside within the school, with the people who best understand the students, rather than in statehouses where legislators are dictating school policy. There would be room for many opinions, rather than just the one in the standardized policy guidelines, and while the collective decision-making structure has its own challenges, Meier insists they are outweighed by the educational benefits to students, especially those who suffer most under a traditional system.

Meier and Sizer have found success with their alternative school models, but the challenge lies in translating their ideas on a broader scale. The process, by the very nature of our political system and the difficulties of large-scale reform of any kind, would be a challenging one, likely to be met with much resistance. However, as Meier states, “In nature, variation, ‘messiness,’ and chaos are not unnatural or unproductive forms of organization. In fact, as biologists would remind us, they are essential features of growth. When school people seek to forbid such messiness, or view it as a burden, we undermine the possibility of proliferation” (*In Schools*, 156-7). A distrust of schools disallows anything that breaks the mold to be more than an alternative experiment, even though the “mold” has proven to have widespread negative effects, especially on the most vulnerable students. Perhaps Meier and Sizer’s models are not the best ways to do things across the board, but we need to open up our minds to other possibilities, since what we are currently working with is so woefully inadequate.

I began this thesis without a clear aim, knowing only that I wanted to use one of my favorite television shows to somehow talk about education. As I narrowed it down to issues of standardization, I was still mainly thinking about high-stakes standardized tests, since that is what “standardization” has come to mean in the popular mindset. However, the more I read and wrote and just thought about the experiences depicted in *The Wire*, the clearer it became that standardization is not just a form of testing students with multiple-choice exams. Standardization, for all the talk of its “greater accountability” purposes and “level playing field” usefulness, is a system that further obscures the inequality built into schools and allows it to proliferate unchecked. As the defining characteristic of No Child Left Behind, it is ironically doing just that—leaving a large number of students, especially those of Color and of low socioeconomic status, to fail. Their failure is then blamed on them or their teachers, but never the system that is essentially set up for them to be left behind.

Discussing her small schools, Meier argues, “If we allow only the standardized models to pass inspection, we can’t claim to be surprised that the others don’t flourish!” (*In Schools*, 157). Although she is specifically addressing her democratic model for schooling, her point applies to the broader phenomenon. As an American public, we continue to bemoan the failure of large numbers of students, but then insist that more testing, more accountability, more “curriculum alignment”—more standardization—is the answer. But until we look outside the realm of standards-based reform, as Bunny Colvin would say, “this shit ain’t gonna change.”

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