

# Comment

## Will more spending fix unequal schools?

By Eric A. Hanushek

Nobody should ignore Jonathan Kozol's vivid descriptions of just how bad schools in our country can be. *Savage Inequalities* further makes the case that our urban centers have some schools that would never come close to acceptability in more affluent suburbs.

The gripping portraits are largely, but not exclusively, stories of blacks facing segregated schools, poverty, unmet health needs and indifferent or incapable school personnel. These observations from his two-year odyssey into some 30 of the nation's schools provide a more personal backdrop to the public debates of the past quarter century.

Minorities have not performed as well as the majority white population in virtually any dimension of schooling chosen. Kozol fleshes out the harsh and discouraging statistics of others with the cries of anguish from the next generation doomed to be left behind.

The accounts of personal triumphs and tragedies by the children he meets follow in the tradition of his first book in 1967, *Death at an Early Age*. That chronicle of his experiences as a fourth-grade teacher in the Boston ghetto left the reader with the same sense of frustration, pity and anger as his current book. But his early book stopped short of any prescriptions except the implicit message that better teachers, administrators and school committees would yield very different results.

*Savage Inequalities* moves toward solutions. The stark contrasts that come from pairing south Chicago with New Trier, Ill.; Camden, N.J., with Princeton; and the Bronx with Great Neck, N.Y., set the policy stage. The central conclusion from his frequent comparisons of worst with best is that money differences are at the heart of educational problems. Solve them, and everything else will presumably fall into place.

The route to this conclusion is, however, confusing. Some outcomes of fiscal shortages in urban education recur in Kozol's descriptions. Schools in temporary facilities, those without proper lighting and ventilation, and those lacking playgrounds and athletic fields clearly have problems that can directly be solved by more money. But if all that were required to solve the problems of inner city schools was correcting these



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### BOOKSHELF

- **THE BOOK:** *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*, by Jonathan Kozol, Crown, 262 pages, \$20.00.
- **THE REVIEWER:** Eric A. Hanushek is a professor of economics and political science at the University of Rochester.

glaring problems, I suspect it could and would be done overnight.

It is not clear, however, that this is where Kozol thinks the money would have its largest impact. The hopeful parts of his visits come in terms of teachers who perform amid the squalor. Probably from his own background as a motivated and motivating teacher, Kozol sees the indispensable influence of the classroom teacher.

There is an admiring passage about Corla Hawkins of Chicago that ends with the observation that we do not know how to write her into other teachers' lesson plans. The message Kozol takes from such teachers is they appear almost as too-infrequent accidents. Why should they endure the hardships and difficulties of south Chicago while the teachers of New Trier, with its greater fiscal capacity, can have both higher pay and a better environment? He hints that he would increase teachers' pay. Corla Hawkins is deserving of more by his description, but surely the same is not true for the other teachers, described equally as vividly, who have no interest or talent for teaching. If paid more, would they turn into Corla Hawkinses?

Here is where we long-term fans of Jonathan Kozol are caught in conflict. *Death at an Early Age* ham-

mered home the observation that the very culture of urban schools was their downfall. Disinterested teachers, bureaucratic principals, stultifying administrations and malevolent school boards merged to preclude effective teaching in the inner city. Combined with the other problems that urban children brought to school with them, the result was a fragmented society ruled by self-perpetuating racial and class differences. If President Bush suddenly argued for bringing spending of all schools up (to the top?), would we automatically select better teachers, administrators and school boards?

This is a dubious proposition. Kozol provides no evidence of districts that improved when provided more resources. Moreover, he gives reason to doubt that improvement would be widespread. One principal, for example, faced with an impossible schooling situation, responds that she "could use some new rugs."

*Savage Inequalities* describes an open and festering sore in society, and then prescribes two aspirin and bed rest. After graphically recounting differences in the environments of the best and worst schools, he returns to the only prescription we have ever employed. We have tried his blind spend-money policy, and it has not worked.

Since publication of *Death at an Early Age*, expenditures per pupil in the United States have more than doubled after allowing for inflation. During this period, almost all indicators show that student performance fell. This includes student performance in south Chicago and New Trier. Moreover, detailed investigations have confirmed just what Kozol told us in the past: Money will not make much difference unless it is accompanied by truly significant changes in the organization and administration of the schools.

This creates a real dilemma because, in promoting the case for changes in school finance, Kozol leaves few places to turn. He denies the ability of poor parents either to help their children or to choose good schools; attacks the motivation of nonpoor parents, asserting the schooling is clearly just a zero-sum game; holds little hope for positive moves by either education officials or the courts; and documents the uneven ability and motivation of the existing teaching force.

In all of this, however, Kozol never considers introducing some sort of performance incentives — say those supplied by merit pay, expanded magnet schools, public school choice or vouchers — to focus any spending on productive uses. Performance incentives would be truly revolutionary and might be something that could chip away at the awful situations so well documented by the author. Instead, *Savage Inequalities* reiterates an old solution that has only perpetuated America's education problems.