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THROUGH THE WIRE:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE PORTRAYAL OF URBAN PUBLIC EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The issues surrounding public education in large American cities are nothing new. Urban public schools have long had graduation rates that were lower than suburban public schools in the same area. Politicians have always claimed to be the person who was going to reform public education with little actual results. In 2001, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act with bipartisan support. This law was supposed to be defining education reform law that would change modern public education. However, it has been largely criticized for unreasonable goals since its enactment. Recently, on the heels of the release of the documentary “Waiting For Superman,” public attention has again turned to public education reform. This time the conversation focuses on promoting charter schools as a better alternative to public schools. This rhetoric blames students and teachers for not working hard enough without incentive for competition. Much of the media discourse revolves around that point. However, the fourth season of HBO’s *The Wire* presents a different argument. *The Wire* claims that the institutions that influence public education are to blame for the failure of urban public schools. This study is an examination of the narrative shown in current news media discourse and in the fourth season of *The Wire*.

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Introduction

The bell rings and a horde of young students enters the school. The screen goes blank before flashing a simple message: “Lambs to the slaughter here.” Just a few minutes in to the first episode of *The Wire*’s fourth season, the tone was set by the juxtaposition of the two images. The clip of students entering the school ends the opening credits montage in every episode of the season while the following screen always displays a line from that episode. The message displayed by these images is simple and one that continues throughout the entire season — that students in the urban public education system are innocent victims of a system that sets students up for failure. The fourth season of *The Wire* asserts that problems with public education in large American cities are systemic. The show contends that the issues do not lay with the students or the teachers, but with people with greater power that mold school districts and limit the resources available to schools. *The Wire* makes the case that the political economy of public education holds back students from achieving the most possible success. The show argues that political and economic forces far beyond the day-to-day operations of the classroom represent the central problem in the public education system. *The Wire* has emerged as a rare serious critique of the education system in entertainment media. *The Wire* presents a dissenting opinion of the media discourse on education reform, making it a text worth studying.

With education reform emerging as a closely covered issue in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Baltimore Sun* and documentary films like “Waiting for Superman,” the status of public education is an issue ripe for media and cultural analysis. In order to gather as many ideas as possible, arguments must be taken from every source. This involves analyzing the media portrayal of public urban education, both from entertainment and news media sources. This topic is worthy of study because education reformers must know the messages being

disseminated to the public by the media. Two distinct schools of thought have emerged when discussing public education reform. One blames teachers and students for not working hard enough. The other blames politicians and administrators for setting up a system that is destined to fail. The news media accounts have focused on blaming the teachers and students while *The Wire* adopts the other point of view. Therefore, the messages portrayed in *The Wire* are important to examine as they differ from the ones seen in the news media. As an attempted realistic portrayal of urban life, *The Wire* presents arguments not seen frequently in the media. *The Wire* becomes a text worthy of study because of its unique perspective.

Systemic failure represents the main theme throughout the course of the series. *The Wire* is a television series that chronicles the life of the citizens of modern-day Baltimore. The series consisted of five seasons, which aired on Home Box Office (HBO) from June 2, 2002 to March 9, 2008. *The Wire* was created and mainly written by David Simon, a former police reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*. The show was also written and produced by Ed Burns, a former Baltimore homicide and narcotics detective who later became a public school teacher in the city. Each season of *The Wire* is based around a different aspect of Baltimore. The constant backdrop storyline is the illegal drug trade and the police department's war on it. This storyline is present in every season, including being the main focus of Seasons 1 and 3. Season 2 deals with the struggles of dockworkers and union members in a critique of unregulated capitalism. Season 4 features the plight of the urban public education system. Season 5 focuses on the ever-changing journalism landscape. Each season highlights the systematic failure involved with each of the season's specific topic. In Seasons 1 and 3, the narrative focuses on the police department's failure to ever truly curb the drug trade. Season 2 emphasizes the failures of unregulated capitalism and the struggling unions caused by it. Season 5 critiques the media system for

focusing more on selling newspapers and winning awards — under the insistence of bosses — than writing the important stories investigating the true root causes of problems in the community. And as mentioned before, Season 4 criticizes the actions of politicians and school administrators in dealing with issues of urban public education. The show's disdain for the current education policy can be seen on the cover of the DVD box set for Season 4. The cover simply reads, "No Corner Left Behind," a blatant reference to and criticism of the federal No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2002. In each of the situations presented in each season, it is the system, not the people, that is portrayed as the failure — particularly in the fourth season. The people are simply portrayed as victims of a situation out of their control.

Despite an unusually large cast, Simon has often said that Baltimore is the main character of the series. The show is about Baltimore and its struggles. But Simon also has also said that Baltimore represents every large city in the United States because they likely face the same issues. One of those issues is the struggles of the urban education system to properly prepare its students for life after education. In 2009, the *New York Times* reported that average graduation rate of the 50 largest cities in the country was 53 percent. The suburban public schools have an average graduation rate of 71 percent (Dillon). According to the report, the graduation rate for inner-city Baltimore schools was 41 percent while the suburban Baltimore schools graduate 81 percent of their students. Numerous other statistics show a continuing achievement gap between urban and suburban public schools. The numbers represent a disturbing trend in a country where education is not only provided by the public but compulsory as well. Education reform has always been a popular topic with politicians. Education reform is often a main platform of presidential candidates. In April 2011, President Barack Obama called education inequality "the civil rights issue of our time" (Cooper 2011). Yet the statistics remain the same.

As long as the statistics continue to reflect poorly on the public education system in urban environments, the public will continue to have a debate about potential solutions in the media spectrum. With the emergence of school vouchers and charter schools as potential answers, the news media has focused on this aspect, often placing blame for school failure at the feet of students and teachers. However, *The Wire* portrays teachers and students as victims of systemic failure. Critically acclaimed as a realistic portrayal of urban life, *The Wire* grounds its viewpoint in the experiences of Simon and Burns in their professional years on the streets of Baltimore. In Simon's career as a journalist and Burns' as a police officer and teacher, they saw a different problem facing large cities than the ones currently presented by the news media. They saw systemic issues that caused people to fail. Although much of the media discourse on school reform blames teachers and students for failing, HBO's critically acclaimed *The Wire* blames the political economy of education because of the life experiences of the show's creators.

In this paper, I will first explain the Just World Theory, which provides a lens to view the problem through and a potential explanation for the current media rhetoric. I will then review and describe the current media discourse about education issues. This will establish the point that much of the media conversation currently focuses on what students and teachers are doing wrong, not on what politicians and administrators are doing. I will then identify the methods in which I conducted research on the fourth season of *The Wire*. Following that, I will argue that political and economic factors beyond the students' and teachers' control influence the success of urban public schools as established by the fourth season of *The Wire*. These arguments will be grounded in the real-life experiences of the show's creators, David Simon and Ed Burns. Finally, I will offer suggestions as to which direction the public debate about urban education should

head. I will offer ideas about how the media can help to solve the problem currently facing the country.

Literature Review

Just World Theory

Without knowing it, many people believe in and practice the Just World Theory every day. Coined by social psychology professor Melvin J. Lerner, the Just World Theory states that “people have a need to believe that their environment is a just and orderly place where people usually get what they deserve” (Lerner and Miller 1978). The theory is founded on the idea that people want to be able to explain why things happen, particularly horrible, tragic events. Many people feel that there is a reason that something occurs. Without this belief, it would be difficult for individuals to justify their daily activities. As Lerner and Miller write, “without such a belief it would be difficult for the individual to commit himself to the pursuit of long range goals or even to the socially regulated behavior of day-to-day life” (1978). A person needs to believe that their actions and attitudes will result in a fair outcome. This is part of self-motivation. People must believe that they will receive their deserved reward in proportion to the amount of work put in. Simply, hard workers will thrive while lazy people will struggle.

Lerner found this to be a skewed way to look at the world because of many factors outside of an individual’s control that influence events. But his research continually revealed that people tend to believe in a just world at some level. In his first experiment, observers felt that people who received electric shocks deserved them for struggling to answer a complex mental problem. The observers, who were the subjects of the experiment, had rationalized the punishment of the person answering the question because of a belief in a just world and desire to blame the victim (1978).

Blaming the victim is often the most visible aspect of the Just World Theory. In order to maintain the belief that the world is naturally just, people must often find a way to blame the victim for a certain event happening. This is often seen in cases of rape as seen in a study done by Carli. In the experiment, subjects were read identical accounts of a male and female interacting. However, the endings were different as one ended in the woman being raped and the other in a marriage proposal. Carli found that subjects remember details of the story differently depending on ending they heard. People who heard the marriage ending had a positive view of the woman throughout the story. People who heard the rape ending altered details from the story to make it seem like she deserved to be raped. Subjects inferred certain things about the victim's characteristics that made it seem as if she deserved to be raped (Carli 1999). Hafer and Begue (2005) found evidence of victim blaming in other situations. A picketer was hit by a car and a judge ruled that he was to blame for violating the driver's right to freely move on the road. A celebrity who died in a car crash while trying to escape paparazzi was viewed by some as mentally unstable for preventing the paparazzi from doing their job. In other case, a rape victim was told her negative attitude attracted more negativity to her, making the rape more likely. She was also told that was what she deserved for living in that particular neighborhood. Carli finds evidence of hindsight bias in her study, meaning subjects alter their recollection of the story to justify the end result. Instead of focusing on the actual cause, people — if they have a strong belief in a just world — try to explain what the victim did to cause the event.

According to Lerner, people believe in a just world to make themselves feel safer. Blaming the victim allows people to believe that they will avoid hardship if they simply do the right things (Lerner 1978). The Just World Theory is also called the Just World Fallacy because of its lack of realism, which Lerner often points out. Researchers have expressed concern about

society's strong belief in a just world and warn of its potential consequences. Hafer and Begue argue that "the more people need to believe in a just world, the more they should be motivated to preserve a sense of justice in the face of contradictory evidence." If people truly believe that the world is naturally a fair place, they will actively work to preserve the current system. Despite evidence of injustice, people would ignore it to try to cement their belief in a just world, leading to little societal progress. Andre and Velasquez (1990) also saw the strong desire for people to believe in a just world as a problem for the same reason. The authors argue that such a strong belief in a just world has significant social implications because it would undermine a commitment to justice. People would not actively work to provide equal justice for all, if they felt the world was already a just place. This could potentially lead to incessant victim blaming and victims being the victim repeatedly. A strong societal belief in a just world could cause it.

Media Discourse on School Reform

The strategy of blaming the victim is prevalent in the media discourse regarding school reform. Both the entertainment and news media have blamed teachers and students for the systematic failure of urban public schools. When the media does portray urban public schools in a positive light, it often focuses on one person who was able to succeed, implying that that person worked harder than others and the result is deserved. The same display of the Just World Theory can be seen in many movies and television shows dealing with urban schools. In movies and on TV shows, often a teacher must simply relate to students to get them to learn. Once that connection is established, almost every student flourishes, which ignores reality and instead focuses on a viewing the world through a Just World Theory lens. Pedro Noguera, a former urban public school student and teacher, criticizes this portrayal in his book, *City Schools and the American Dream: Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education*. Noguera believes in critiquing

current schools while also maintaining support for public schools, which he calls “pragmatic optimism” (Noguera 2003). He is optimistic that schools can improve but pragmatic in that he knows not everyone will succeed because of factors outside the school gates such as homelessness and drug abuse. Noguera criticizes scholars who “use their personal success as a basis for castigating others, especially black people, for laziness and anti-intellectualism” (Noguera 2003). Noguera notes the outside factors saying, “Children don’t get to choose their parents, the neighborhood they’ll grow up in, the school they’ll attend, or the teachers to whom they’ll be assigned” (2003). The author then critiques the news media for focusing on individual success stories. He cites the celebration of one student who overcame many obstacles to succeed in school as an example that the media reinforces that individual effort matters more than structural change. According to Noguera, “as a society we are generally far more comfortable extolling the virtues of individual responsibility and merit, even as the structural nature of the problems affecting poor kids and schools in poor neighborhoods go unexplored and unaddressed in policy” (2003). Through this media narrative, publications are reinforcing the idea that the struggling students are simply being lazy. The media is saying the students get what they deserve, which is false, according to Noguera.

While students have been criticized in the media, teachers have been especially demonized. With the release of the popular documentary “Waiting for ‘Superman’” much of the media discourse has turned to blaming teachers and teachers’ unions. In the New York Magazine in March 2011, Andrew Rice wrote that the old way of viewing teachers as people who should be “treated like saints and paid as if they’d taken a vow of poverty” has completely changed (Rice 2011). Instead, Rice observes the current education reform debate centers around supposed “bad” teachers who are holding students back and being overly compensated because

of unions, which is an argument that has surprisingly received bipartisan support. Michelle Rhee, the former chancellor of Washington, D.C. schools and the subject of Rice's story, has received support from New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg (a Republican turned independent), New Jersey Governor Chris Christie (a Republican) and President Barack Obama's Secretary of Education Arne Duncan among others on her mission to improve schools by busting up unions and evaluating individual teachers. While Rhee serves as the unaffiliated campaigner for this brand of education reform, many politicians across the country are following her lead. Rice notes that Wisconsin's Republican Governor Scott Walker wrote a column for *The Wall Street Journal* detailing his efforts to break up public sector unions. On the same day, the Democratic mayor of Newark, Cory Booker, had a piece published in the *New York Post* emphasizing many of the points made by Walker, including a desire to lay off teachers deemed ineffective. This echoes President Obama's 2011 State of the Union address in which he said, "We want to reward good teachers and stop making excuses for bad ones" (Rice 2011). Across the country, politicians are attempting to remove many teacher benefits such as Florida governor Rick Scott, who wants to abolish teacher tenure. A mayor in Rhode Island laid off every teacher in his town, forcing them to reapply so he can properly select the ones he wants.

While politicians have steered media discourse about education reform toward the supposed evils of teachers' unions, pro-union activists have attempted to point out a potential ulterior motive for the politicians. Bruce T. Boccardy, a local union president in Massachusetts, argues that these politicians do not want to improve schools but rather "the real agenda behind this ploy is the decimation of the public school system, eventual costly privatization, and the elimination of teachers' unions" (Boccardy 2011). He points to 89 teachers in Rhode Island

being laid off for working in “underperforming schools” despite none of them ever receiving an “unsatisfactory performance evaluation” (Boccardy 2011).

In the past two years, “Waiting for ‘Superman’” has set the tone for discussion surrounding education reform. The documentary won the Audience Award for best documentary at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival and grossed millions of dollars at the box office. Because of its popularity, director Davis Guggenheim made the rounds on talk shows, appearing on Oprah among others. But Swalwell and Apple (2010) argue that the national conversation caused by “Waiting for ‘Superman’” is a flawed one. The authors pan the film as an “overly simplistic picture of what ails American public schools” with “equally naïve solutions for what should fix them.” The documentary paints teachers and teachers’ unions as villains who are holding back the students by being lazy and unenthusiastic. It shows charter schools and their supposedly more enthusiastic teachers as the solution to most of public education’s problems. The documentary essentially ignores any other factors that plague public education. Swalwell and Apple (2010) critique the documentary by saying, “Through its visual codes, its absent presences, its lack of respect for the hard work of teachers and its demonization of teachers’ unions as the ultimate source of our educational problems, and its failure to deal with the racial structures of this society and the structural sources of income inequality and the fundamentally flawed tax system in this nation, director Davis Guggenheim and producer Leslie Chilcott deliver our schools to some of the very same ideological and economic movements about which there are justifiable worries.” Simply put, the leading conversation starter about education reform has simplified the issues and blamed the teachers for flaws in the system. The documentary insists teachers must simply improve, rather than pointing out the flaws in the public education system.

While these media portrayals tend to the issues of urban public education as ones with simple solutions, *The Wire* muddles the picture by presenting the issues as complex. The news media has presented the argument that breaking up teachers' unions and rigorously evaluating individual teachers will increase student performance. "Waiting for 'Superman'" declares charter schools as the absolute answer to the problems faced by urban schools. These portrayals paint a black and white picture of the education debate. The arguments focus on one issue of education and claim that fixing it will solve all the problems. Failing to fix it will allow the problems to continue. However, *The Wire* presents a more complicated look at the problem. It identifies many factors that influence the success of schools. *The Wire* shows not the black and white problems and solutions, but rather the gray overlap of multiple problems plaguing the urban public education system. *The Wire* identifies the role government, school officials and other outside influences can potentially affect student and teacher performance in the classroom.

Method

To compare the arguments made by the fourth season of *The Wire* to arguments made by current media outlets, I identified the portrayals of urban public education made by both sides. By reading the most recent scholarship on the media's portrayal of education reform, I was able to identify the themes of the current debate. Media and political discourse currently centers on teachers' unions and potentially breaking them up. During the past year, that has emerged as the main point being made in the media.

To identify the arguments about urban public education made by *The Wire*, I watched the fourth season three times. Each time, I took detailed notes about every scene that related to the inner-city school system. I then coded my notes of each scene depending on which aspect of the political economy of education it dealt with. I coded the scenes into three categories: government involvement, classroom scenes/ school administration factors, and events outside school that influence the students. These emerged as the three clear categories as the storyline jumps back and forth between the three aspects of public education. All three are seen throughout the show as having influence on teaching and learning. The narrative structure of *The Wire* shows multiple different storylines that rarely directly interact. For example, an official from the mayor's office rarely interacts with a school administrator. The storylines take place separate from each other but the viewer is able to how actions taken by characters in one plotline influence the other plotlines. Scenes where the mayor and city council discussed procuring funding for the school system as well as discussing education as an election issue were coded as government factors. Scenes where the school board or high ranking school officials were influencing the classroom experience were coded as school administration factors. In the same category were scenes that dealt with issues within the classroom caused by school district

policies. Scenes that dealt with the struggles of students financially or with family life were coded as factors outside of school that impact students. I then read interviews with the show's creators David Simon and Ed Burns to relate the scenes to their live experiences. I was then able to match up each category with a specific experience.

To ground my argument in a theoretical base, I also read scholarship on the Just World Theory. The Just World Theory provides an established social theory to view the arguments of The Wire and the news media through. Given the arguments made by The Wire and the news media about teachers and students, the theory provides the appropriate approach to comparing the two sets of information.

Limits to using this method include only having one coder for the scenes from The Wire. Some scenes could potentially overlap into multiple categories. However, this method was necessary in order to establish consistency in the coding of scenes. Another limit to my method may be missing information from The Wire's creators' lives. I am relying on secondhand information gathered from interviews, which may not detail every relevant experience. However, such a method was necessary as personally interviewing the creators was not possible.

Results and Discussion

Textual analysis of The Wire

The Wire, although incredibly complicated, can be summed up with one character and one theme. The main character is Baltimore, which represents most major American cities, and the main theme is the failure of institutions. Each season chronicles a different institutional failure. The fourth season highlights the plight of the urban public education system. The Wire presents an argument that the schools struggle for multiple reasons. Instead of blaming the victims of the school system for its faults, The Wire contends that it is not simply bad teachers or unmotivated students that cause the schools to have low graduation rates and standardized test scores. Instead, The Wire argues that the failure of urban public schools is caused by the political economy of education. The political economic factors highlighted by the fourth season of The Wire are school administrators obsessed with standardized test scores, which determine funding, a city government low on funds and politicians trying to be reelected. Other factors that influence the school's success is the administration's desire to treat all students equally despite differing behaviors and the lure of the drug trade on the streets. The Wire's argument is backed by the life experiences of the show's main writers and producers David Simon and Ed Burns. David Simon was a police reporter for the *Baltimore Sun* and Ed Burns is a former Baltimore City police officer who later became an inner-city school teacher. The combined experiences of these two give The Wire a sense of realism and provide credibility to the show's argument.

Government

“We won’t go until we get some.”

-Norman Wilson

The sharpest argument offered by *The Wire* as to why schools perform at subpar levels is standardized testing. Standardized testing is a large part of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which is sharply criticized by *The Wire*. The cover of the fourth season’s DVD reads “No Corner Left Behind” in an obvious dig at the federal education law. In multiple scenes, cop-turned-math teacher Roland Prezbylewski (Prez) — a clear reference to Burns — is seen ranting about the standardized testing. Because standardized test results determine school funding, they are taken extremely importantly by school administrators. Teachers are required to devote class time to teaching standardized test questions. Prez is forced to teach English in his math class, causing the students to miss out on valuable class time. In his frustration, Prez simply asks, “And what do they learn?” No one has an answer as the veteran teachers understand the system and realize how important the tests are. In this case, learning is again sacrificed in the name of increased funding. In order to make the school (and in turn, the politicians) look good, teachers must focus on the standardized testing.

The Wire portrays education reform as a poor topic to win an election with. Fictional Baltimore’s new mayor Tommy Carcetti essentially ignored the topic during his campaign, suggesting that it is too hard or nearly impossible to fix. His opponent Tony Gray decided to run as the education reform candidate and was easily defeated by Carcetti. Carcetti instead focused on safety, promising extra funds to the police department. A national Democratic advisor attempted to develop a gubernatorial campaign for Carcetti, suggesting that education polls well

among the people. One of Carcetti's employees, Norman Wilson, quickly responded, "No, we gotta stay away from the schools. Our last four administrations left us with an inner city system with inner city problems. We get involved, it becomes our mess."

But when Carcetti took office, he quickly discovered the political and economic pressures associated with the education system. With a campaign promise to police for increased pay still on the table, Carcetti discovers he inherited a \$54 million debt. After his chief of staff suggests it, Carcetti is forced to ask the governor of Maryland for money to fund the school system.

The situation represents the ultimate political conundrum for Carcetti. He wants to run for governor in two years and pleading for money would not look good to the suburban voters. They would question why he could not even pay to run his own school district. The current governor of Maryland knows of Carcetti's future plans and offers to hold a major press conference announcing the funding of the Baltimore City school system. Because of his political aspirations, Carcetti is forced to decline the money. The political pressures on Carcetti negatively impacted the students of Baltimore. The school district received less funding because of him. Carcetti rationalizes the result by saying he can help Baltimore in two years when he is governor, but the show paints him as a self-centered politician looking to advance his own career at the expense of anyone, including his city's children.

Coming from a journalist's perspective, Simon offered harsh words toward No Child Left Behind and standardized testing in an interview with Salon.com. Simon criticized local journalists for missing the stories that really matter. He claims local newspapers "missed the fact that the third-grade test scores are cooked to make it look like the schools are improving, when in fact it doesn't extend to the fifth grade, and that No Child Left Behind is an unmitigated disaster"

(Havrilesky 2008). Local media outlets want to cover the school system but focus their time on other events, never returning to report on the failing school system.

Simon again uses his inside knowledge of politics to attempt to show that the system is hurting students. While Simon never fully covered a political beat, he was around it long enough to pick up enough information. However, another writer for the show, Bill Zorzi, covered state and municipal politics for the *Baltimore Sun* for twenty years so he knows the inner-workings of the local government. Simon wants viewers to see a side of the government rarely portrayed, which includes showing the decision making process for government officials. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Simon said, in the *Wire*, “you see the equivocations. You see the stuff that doesn't make it into the civics books. And also you see how interconnected things are.” (Simon 2008). By showing the behind the scenes political decision making process, Simon exposes the selfish side of the government. Elected representatives are supposed to act for the good of the people but *The Wire* argues that they often work in their own best interest. The system of constantly trying to get elected benefits only the person trying to get elected. The political pressures on government officials to act a certain way undermine the entire system. The system of government and its natural political and economic pressures abuses its people. This again leaves teachers and students as not the ones to blame, but the victims.

School Administrators

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

-Prez

The Wire argues that a main cause of underperforming schools is a diminished classroom environment caused by school district administrators, who bog the teachers down with rules and

outdated materials. Policies, standardized tests and the need for all students to have the same expectations harm a school's potential output.

In the fourth season of *The Wire*, seemingly illogical policies minimize learning by instead focusing on funding. The first policy is introduced when reformed drug dealer Cutty Wise is hired at Edward Tilghman Middle School to round up truant students. While attempting to take kids to school, one boy replies that he had already attended school for one day this month. New to the job, Cutty remains confused until he is told that students only need to go to school one day a month for the school to qualify for grants. The school has hired Cutty to make sure that every student comes to school at least once per month. By accepting and adhering to this policy, the school district is showing it is placing a higher priority on securing funding rather than teaching students. But the school has limited resources which it must maximize. The economic forces are pulling on the school to follow this policy. School administrators know the school needs the money to even have any hope of functioning. Because of limited resources, school officials are forced to sacrifice the education of a few in hopes of helping the majority. Cutty's character serves to expose this conflict. As a reformed convict, Cutty has a new moral sense about him and his priority is helping kids. (He would open a free boxing gym for kids to hang out in later in the season.) His focus is simply on education and the betterment of the kids. When he brings it up to school administrators, they seem to understand his concern but explain the need to secure the extra funding. Through Cutty, the audience sees the internal conflict with which school administrators are dealing.

The idea of making the most of limited funds can also be seen through another policy called "social promotion." This policy requires that student be promoted by age rather than achievement. This can even occur during the middle of the school year as happened to a group of

eighth graders, including Duquan who serves as one of the main characters. This group was promoted to ninth grade in December, not because they were ready but because spots in the high school opened up and the middle school could no longer support them. During a meeting with the middle school principal, students express both excitement and apprehension about moving up a grade because they do not think they have yet learned the eighth grade material. The principal lies and tells them they are ready for the high school workload. Given the economic constraints on the principal, she has very little choice. The principal seems dejected but resigned to the fact that the school is doing little educating, instead simply providing a place to spend eight hours each day. In order to conserve resources, students are simply advanced through the system, whether they have passed the current grade or not. Students do not learn but are promoted due to economic issues.

However, there are some resources available that school administrators choose not to use. Prez accidentally discovers brand new textbooks and computers in the school's basement. Prez decides to use the new books and utilize the computer in classroom learning. Meanwhile, he is warned to stay on the curriculum by the school's principals. Here Prez experiences the political power of his boss in regulating his lessons. He is unable to deviate slightly from the curriculum and is forced to do as he is told in order to keep his job. The principal likely told Prez to stay on curriculum to make sure he was teaching the material on the state standardized tests.

The pressure on the school to do well is both political and economic. The government set a certain standard that each school must meet. If a school does not meet that standard, the state would likely take over the school, usurping every administrator's power. Funding is also likely to be withheld from a school that performs poorly on the test. Prez is faced with the dilemma of

doing what's best for his students and doing what's best for his career with political and economic pressures pulling from one side while ethical pressures pull from the other.

The most innovative and potentially radical argument regarding education in Season Four is the idea to separate certain students from regular classrooms. The worst-behaved kids in the class were put in a special class taught by a researcher from the University of Maryland. This plan removes many of the distractions from the normal classrooms, allowing teachers to spend more time on the material. The point of the special class is to attempt to socialize the misbehaving children in hopes that they can return to regular classes. The plan seemed to be working with both sides making progress. However, school district administrators heard about the program and labeled it "tracking." Tracking involves setting different standards for different students, which is long considered taboo in public education. For that reason, the school district shuts down the specialized classroom. The district fears the potential backlash from parents who find out that their child has been treated differently. Because of the possible parental reactions, the students were returned to normal classes and the program was shut down, barring any further progress from being made.

Burns, one of the show's creators, has first-hand experience in this category, having been a teacher for seven years. While the "tracking" system was not implemented where Burns taught, he thought it may work. The idea of a different classroom for rowdy kids was actually Simon's, the show's other creator. During an interview with HBO, Burns said that a small amount of students could disrupt an entire class, preventing kids from learning. Burns told HBO "It's how damaged these kids are. You get a class of 35 kids, of which five or six are thugs — what are called 'oppositionally defiant children.' So they're fighting and disruptive and cursing you like sailors" (Burns). Burns thought that a similar result would have happened in real life

that happened in the show if they could remove the rowdiest kids. Removing them would create a quiet learning atmosphere for the rest of the class. But because of political and economic constraints, misbehaved students must remain part of the regular classes. Schools cannot isolate students based on their potential. If parents were to hear about it, the school and local politician would face serious backlash. Because parents are also voters, politicians want to keep parents as happy as possible.

Burns also experienced the effects of “social promotion” while he was teaching at a Baltimore school. Because students were simply promoted by age, rather than ability or achievement, Burns was faced with a classroom with varying levels of comprehension. About the diversity in the classroom, Burns said, “The educational range in a classroom, if you’re teaching eighth grade, is probably from first grade to sixth grade. So you have students who can’t read a lick to kids who maybe can read on the sixth grade level” (Burns). Through his first-hand experience, Burns feels that it is hard to properly teach a class if every student is on a different level. The only thing they have in common is their age, not their ability to do the work. Burns said in the same interview that it was nearly impossible to teach in his classroom but he did find moments where the class focused enough that he could educate them.

Life on the Streets

“How do you get from here to the rest of the world?”

-Dukie

The Wire also argues that students may be motivated to leave school to pursue more profitable activities. Students may also be forced to leave school to provide for their family financially. These economic factors also cause urban public school systems to fail as students are either forced to leave or lured away. The fourth season of The Wire chronicles the lives of four

eighth-grade boys as they struggle with school and life outside the classroom. Each boy has their own problems and outside factors affecting their schoolwork. The four boys — Namond, Michael, Randy and Dukie — are a group of friends who usually have class together and hang out outside of school. While the boys are friends, each comes from a different family background, ranging from having a strict foster mother to having a drug addict mother to a mother who encourages her son to get involved in the drug trade. Throughout the season, each boy takes his own path to adulthood. The one commonality in their lives is the school they attend. However, each boy experiences different levels of success at school, showing that outside factors also influence student performance.

Namond is the loud, brash boy who spends most of his time in the research class at school. He is the son of a convicted drug dealer and his mother has grown accustomed to an affluent lifestyle. Namond's mother constantly demands that he work on the streets as a corner boy. She constantly tells him he needs to be the man of the house and make some money. In that family, the only way they know how to make money is through the drug trade. But Namond lacks the tough mentality needed for success on the corners. Yet he often considers dropping out of school to deal drugs full time. The economic motivation is there as even a bad drug dealer makes more money than a kid in a classroom.

Michael is the calm, tough boy who quickly emerges as the leader of the group of friends. His mother is a drug addict so Michael must take care of his little brother, Bug. In order to make enough money for school clothes and food, Michael works the corner for a few days. He quits after he has made enough money but he has made an impression on Marlo Stanfield, a drug kingpin who heavily recruits the boy. Needing income to provide for himself and Bug, Michael finally relents and joins Marlo's crew. Marlo provides Michael with an apartment and steady

income. In order to do his new job, Michael is forced to drop out of school, giving in to the economic forces pulling him away from the classroom.

Duquan, or “Dukie,” is a kind, compassionate boy who comes from an incredibly broken home. All of his family members are drug addicts who sell his clothes for a fix. Unless it is provided by Prez, Dukie rarely has food, clean clothes and a place to bathe. When his family is evicted, he has no place to stay so he eventually moves into Michael’s new apartment. By living there, Dukie gets caught up in the drug trade and also drops out of school. When Michael realizes Dukie is not tough enough for the streets, Michael pays him to watch Bug. Like the other boys, economic pressures motivate Dukie to leave the classroom. Dukie cannot survive unless he does what Michael needs him to do. With no support system, Dukie cannot afford to spend time in school all day.

Randy is a fun-loving entrepreneur who has a good home with his foster mother. However, Randy accidentally aids in a murder and serves as a police witness. In order to keep his name out of the records, Prez asks a friend in the police department to protect his identity. However, Randy’s name gets out and he is labeled a “snitch” on the street. His house is firebombed, killing his foster mother. Randy is then sent to a group home where he is forced to toughen up. He leaves Edward Tilghman Middle School after being pulled away by the systematic error of the police department.

For all of these boys, factors beyond their control led to them leaving school. For Randy and Namond, force by a more powerful person or institution removed them from school. Michael and Dukie had a choice to leave but had very few options. Both boys needed financial security. In all four cases, the boys are victims. Their education was not interrupted because

they were unmotivated, but rather because of outside factors beyond their control. The outcomes of the four boys represent the most unjust results of the season. The world hardly treated them justly as Namond — the meanest of the boys — ends up in the best situation. Both Dukie and Randy were kind-hearted, moral people throughout, yet have the worst ending. After hanging around the corners, Dukie eventually becomes an addict. Although the audience is never shown the true ending for Randy, he is last seen being assaulted by other boys in the group home. The outcomes of the boys show the creators likely do not subscribe to a belief in a just world.

The four boys' stories seem real because of the professional experiences of Simon and Burns, who previously held jobs as a crime reporter and police officer-turned-teacher, respectively. Having both been on the street in the middle of the drug scene in their previous careers, Simon and Burns can offer a true perspective on the struggles of young people to stay out of the "game." In an interview with Bill Moyers, Simon criticized the system based on his observations as a reporter, saying, "We pretend to educate the kids. We pretend that we're actually including them in the American ideal, but we're not. And they're not foolish. They get it. They understand that the only viable economic base in their neighborhoods is this multi-billion drug trade." (Simon 2008). Recalling his teaching days on HBO.com, Burns related his students to the four seen in the show. "They don't have an option or 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 kids. They will survive. They will learn. It's just a question of where" (Burns). Simon and Burns both agree that there are larger forces that impact the lives of students. It is not simply a matter of motivation that determines a student's academic success. Many other factors are involved, including the decisions of the administration, the decisions of the government and personal financial issues.

Conclusion

Though much media discourse has focused on blaming the students and teachers in urban public schools for poor performance, the fourth season of *The Wire* paints a different picture. *The Wire* argues that political and economic forces beyond the control of the students and teachers dictate the success of the school. *The Wire* does this by pointing out the intersection between the political realm, the school and the neighborhood. Each of these elements affects the other in regard to the school. The schools struggle with funding because politicians do not grant it to them. Politicians do not give it to them in order to save face and attempt to win another election. The community struggles with poverty, giving the primarily property tax funded schools little resources to work with. *The Wire* makes the argument that school failure is all part of a vicious cycle and an unforgiving system. There are outside pressures that mold the way that students and teachers act in the classroom. *The Wire* argues that school failure has little to do with work ethic or motivation and everything to do with systemic, institutionalized issues. Unlike news media's accounts, *The Wire* engages in very little victim blaming. Through the real-life experiences of Simon and Burns, *The Wire* portrays realistic depictions of what life is like on the streets of Baltimore. Based on their first-hand experiences, Simon and Burns have argued that the public education system and those that influence it are flawed; the system has set up its people for failure. News outlets, in contrast, have focused on the lack of motivation by students and teachers to properly do the necessary work. Teachers' unions have become demonized as a wall for bad teachers to hide behind. *The Wire* makes little mention of teachers' unions, instead choosing to focus on the institutional failure of the government and school systems.

Unlike the news media, the fourth season of *The Wire* presents the realistic complex situation plaguing urban public education. *The Wire* gets it right by portraying the issues as multi-faceted and complicated. The biggest flaws in dysfunctional school systems likely lie with the institution. As *The Wire* argues, the interconnection between the government and the school administrators creates an environment that allows officials to lose sight of the overall goal. Instead of always doing the best thing for the students, officials may do the best thing for their personal gain, as shown in *The Wire* when Carcetti denies the extra funding in order to advance his political career. *The Wire* also rightfully critiques the one-size-fits-all policies passed by legislators. Lawmakers enact education reform laws, like No Child Left Behind, that assumes all schools are on a level playing field. This is clearly not the case as schools do not have equal resources, whether the resources are funding, students or teachers. A truly reformatory law might include different expectations for different schools with the goal of universal success in the future. However, current laws — as *The Wire* points out — expect unrealistic and nearly impossible immediate improvements for the country's worst performing schools. Another practice critiqued by *The Wire* that is worth reconsidering is the grouping of students based on age. A better system might group students who perform similarly in order to best serve each student. It makes very little sense to promote a student through the academic system based on age rather than accomplishments. *The Wire* smartly points this out by using the example of promoting students simply because there was no room in the old classrooms. Overall, *The Wire* gets it right by blaming most of the issues on the system, rather than the victims of the system.

However, even as it blames institutions for the failures of the school system, *The Wire* conspicuously ignores one powerful player — teachers' unions. *The Wire* does not defend the unions but rather does not acknowledge them. The argument presented by *The Wire* is clearly

pro-teacher but is also anti-institution, which presents a dilemma when dealing with teachers' unions. Although *The Wire* shows the different influential groups over education policy, it ignores the powerful teachers' unions. The argument presented by the show should have included the teachers' unions to show that teachers are still the victims of the system, even with a powerful institution behind them. In order to maintain its desired realistic portrayal of the education system, *The Wire* should have acknowledged the potential influence of teachers' unions on the debate, even if their voice is not as powerful as the government's or school district's.

Given the divide over the solutions for urban public education between the news media and *The Wire*, media and cultural scholars must continue to evaluate the education reform debate. The different arguments being made by both news and entertainment media will continue to shape the public's view and therefore, shape the debate. Given its track record, the issue of education reform is not going away any time soon. While much media discourse blames students and teachers for the failures of urban public schools, *The Wire* importantly adds the idea that institutional failure is truly to blame. As much of the media blames the victims, *The Wire* provides a necessary dissenting opinion that the system is to blame. Understanding that systemic failure plays a large part in the failures of urban public schools provides a useful starting point to reform the school system. A close examination of the system followed by smart reform, according to *The Wire*, could be the necessary step to closing the gap between urban and suburban public schools that has long plagued the country.

Appendix

List of Season 4 episodes reviewed

	<u>Title</u>	<u>Story written by:</u>	<u>Original air date</u>
1	"Boys of Summer"	David Simon & Ed Burns	September 10, 2006
2	"Soft Eyes"	Ed Burns & David Mills	September 17, 2006
3	"Home Rooms"	Ed Burns & Richard Price	September 24, 2006
4	"Refugees"	Ed Burns & Dennis Lehane	October 1, 2006
5	"Alliances"	David Simon & Ed Burns	October 8, 2006
6	"Margin of Error"	Ed Burns & Eric Overmyer	October 15, 2006
7	"Unto Others"	Ed Burns & William F. Zorzi	October 29, 2006
8	"Corner Boys"	Ed Burns & Richard Price	November 5, 2006
9	"Know Your Place"	Ed Burns & Kia Corthron	November 12, 2006
10	"Misgivings"	Ed Burns & Eric Overmyer	November 19, 2006
11	"A New Day"	David Simon & Ed Burns	November 26, 2006
12	"That's Got His Own"	Ed Burns & George Pelecanos	December 3, 2006
13	"Final Grades"	David Simon & Ed Burns	December 10, 2006

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